

赤松中学（あかまつ・ちゅうがく）

生年月日、年齢、出身地、現住所に至るまで全てが不明の覆面作家。
『アストロノト!』で第3回MF文庫Jライトノベル新人賞優秀賞を受賞。
本作・武装学園小説『緋弾のアリア』は、同作家の2シリーズ目となる。

Illustration

◎こぶいち

ゆずソフト所属の原画担当。

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趣味はゲーム、読書。

ゲームはもっぱら携帯ゲームばかりをプレイ中。

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緋弾のアリアⅢ

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メディアファクトリー

MEDIA
VI
FACTORY

緋弾のアリアⅢ ハニー・トラップ 蜂蜜色の罠

東京武偵高校、そこは武力を行使する探偵——通称『武偵』を育成する特殊な学校。
強襲科の超エリートでSランクの最強武偵・アリアと、そのパートナーに選ばれて
しまった（普段は）ただの一般人・遠山キンジの前に、峰理子が再び帰ってきた。
「一緒にドロボーやろうよ！」という怪しい依頼にためらう二人だったが、理子の
たくみな口車に乗せられる形で協力することになってしまって……。罠がひしめく
館から、リュバン家の秘宝を盗み出せ!! 敵組織のナンバー2『無限罪のブラド』が
いよいよ出現——。絶体絶命の大スケールアクション&ラブコメディー第3弾!!

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赤松中学の本

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緋弾のアリアⅢ ハニー・トラップ
蜂蜜色の罠
[イラスト:こぶいち]

緋弾のアリア

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

ハニー・トラップ
蜂蜜色の罠

赤松中学



P11¹弾 月下の双剣双銃^{カ ド ラ}

P40²弾 武偵高の理子

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P198⁵弾 高度
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盗んでいきました

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Go For The NEXT!!!



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星伽 白雪

緋弾のアリアⅢ

ハニー・トラップ

蜂蜜色の罠

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1st Ammo: Quadras Under the Moon

What will you do.

What will you do Kinji?

"Ki-kun, hug me."

You're the one hugging me...

---Riko Mine Lupin the 4th.

I called the name of the girl who pushed me down onto the bed.

"Sniff... Haahh... Ki-kun's smell... It's turning me on..."

Riko hugged my head and buried her face to my hair.

What squashed my face is none other than Riko's chest. Her well-grown bust has an unbelievably huge volume unbefitting of her small stature.

T-this is bad.

"Ki-kun. Ever since our last encounter, Riko couldn't get you out of her mind. It felt like she had experienced her first true love. Ki-kun, Ki-kun, I love you..."

Riko lowered her head.

Her round eyes, full of bliss, rapturously stared at mine.

Her honey-colored waving hair entwined with mine. From her soft skin emitted a vanilla-like aroma.

A sweet, feminine fragrance that made my head devoid of thought.

"You don't need to think about anything Ki-kun. All you have to do is accept my love."

Riko repeatedly uttered the word 'love' as if to brainwash me.

However...

Riko is the girl who seized my brother.

And the same girl who tried to kill us during the ANA 600 hijack incident.

Not only that, this girl lured me into this room, pretended to be Aria, and deceived me.

And even forced me into Hysteria Mode, despite my resistance.

Can you trust the words of a girl like that?

"...You're getting better at jokes, Riko."

That's right. I am currently in a state called Hysteria Mode.

I somehow switched into this state after some physical contact when Riko was disguised as Aria a few minutes ago.

With my enhanced physical ability right now, I can effortlessly thrust her away.

But if possible, I don't want to use force on ladies.

Riko had probably calculated this.

"Ki-kun, you're mean. You don't believe my words. I'll prove it then. See those costumes? I'll let you dress me. Choose whatever you like!"

Riko pointed to the lump of clothes lying on the ground. Or more specifically, to the maid uniform, nurse suit, grade-school uniform and the likes. The sort of maniac types.

"I'll wear them, and then you're free to do anything, Ki-kun. Yes, anything."

"In that case, give me some time to talk things out first."

"That's out of the question, Ki-kun! My head is already filled with you! I'm so turned on that I can't wait anymore!"

Riko, with flushed cheeks, raised her upper body, but still stayed sitting astride my stomach.

"Wait, Riko---"

As if to interrupt my words, Riko grabbed her uniform's tie and untied it. It slipped down below her.

"Don't worry. I took a bath beforehand."

"Y-yeah. There's nothing bad in cleanliness. But what I'm saying is---"

"Forgive me Ki-kun for being forceful. I know, Riko is a bad girl. She will steal anything that she wants. Why? Because I'm a thief! Even if you're Aria's property, I will steal you from her!"

"But Riko---"

"What is it~?"

"You stole my brother's life as well."

Riko chuckled.

"...You still doubt that he's alive?"

Riko is about to lift up her white blouse.

"What do you mean?"

Thump. I pushed my index finger against Riko's chest, as a sign of protest against her undressing.

"Ahhn!"

Maybe she felt ecstasy just by being touched, Riko's body jerked. Her longing eyes narrowed.

"It's exactly what it means. Well, your brother was my boyfriend before I became crazy for you. Ah! But don't worry. I didn't do these kind of things to your brother."

She's... probably telling the truth.

Nii-san, is a person who can't do these kind of things.

"So Riko is still a virgin! An undefiled lady!"

"Do you have proof?"

"You'll find that out after we're done."

"No. I mean if you have proof that Onii-san is still alive."

"...H, S, S."

!!!

A rush of electricity, like lightning, raced through my back.

"Riko hasn't killed a soul yet. That's why you can't say that I have stolen a life before. More like I stole their body, in other words, abduction. The name 'Butei Killer' is misleading. Riko should have been called 'Butei Kidnapper' instead."

Riko Mine Lupin the 4th, who was labeled as 'Butei Killer', in the past, had erased various exceptional Butei's existence.

One of her victims was my brother, during the seajack that Riko perpetrated.

But it was highly unlikely that Nii-san had told Riko about HSS at that point.

HSS is usually what Nii-san uses to refer to Hysteria Mode, a shortened name for the psychological term, Hysteria Savant Syndrome. Nii-san, just like me, strictly hides that from other people.

---But Riko knows about these things.

Theoretically speaking, knowing this fact doesn't prove one bit that Nii-san is still alive.

However, it's enough proof to consider the possibility.

Nii-san is still alive.

Just with that possibility...

"It's question time!"

Riko, still sitting astride on me, prodded both her cheeks with her index fingers.

"Ki-kun, will you accept Rikorin now? Yes or No? If you choose Yes, after the H-scene, Riko will tell you everything she knows."

Riko giggled. She put her hands down on the bed a second time and drew her face to mine, a distance close enough to feel her sweet breath.

"Ki-ku~n. Make Riko your girlfriend. Riko is a very meek girl. She'll do anything you order her and she'll always be waiting. You want to do it outside? That's fine! It doesn't matter. You are free to do anything to her, whenever or wherever you feel like doing it."

Riko drew her lips close to my ear as to complement the temptation.

"If you do that, HSS... is that what you call it? You can always turn into that cheaty state," Riko whispered.

What will you do?

What will you do now, Kinji? A serious question, this time.

If I choose not to accept Riko because of what she had done to us until now, I'll probably lose my only possible source of information regarding Nii-san.

Conversely, if I choose to accept Riko,

(...Then I can get a clue about Nii-san's whereabouts.)

Ahh. Nii-san.

My idol. My lifesaver. And the person who flipped my life 180 degrees after his sudden disappearance.

Ahh. This is bad. Really bad.

When things came to Nii-san, I couldn't make a sound judgement.

Even being in Hysteria Mode doesn't help at all.

Riko. As what you would expect from the person who carries the blood of the legendary thief, Lupin.

Even knowing the feeling that I had for my brother, which is almost like an adoration, she presented me this choice.

(...Dammit...)

My finger keeping Riko's uniform on was slowly losing strength.

Riko made an "I-did-it!" face.

As if to show it off, Riko flipped up her uniform. Her attractive navel, shapely waist, and her fine breasts enveloped by a yellow bra became apparent.

At that moment, Riko's petulant face had manifested.

"But the thing that Riko hates is the Harem Route."

Shattering sound.

"What do you think you're doing stealing someone's slave!!"

Aria H. Kanzaki kicked the glass window like a SWAT member.

She used a grappling hook to get in here from outside.

Riko descended off the bed as if twisting her body.

Aria disengaged the grappling hook from herself, and with an acrobat-like motion, drew the twin guns from under her deep-red skirt.

Bang! Bang! Bang!!

A series of muzzle flashes. After split second delays, .45 ACP bullets were released.

Swoosh!

Riko dodged the bullets with a skillful roll of her body. She grabbed a red ransel (a school satchel) that was mixed among the costumes sprawled on the floor and placed it on her shoulders as she stood up.

"I can't believe it! And I thought it would take longer until Aria got here."

Riko drew a big pocket watch, as she said that.

"You filthy thief! How dare you steal my property!"

For now, let's drop the matter regarding Aria treating me as property. Aria, standing with her two legs open above my face, has had her face dyed all-red since her entrance.



Blush Mode to the max.

A degree that could emit vapor from her head.

I reckon she had been listening to our conversation prior to her intrusion for quite a bit of time.

"Aria! Don't you think the scenario's a bit messed up if a different heroine appeared in the middle of the H-scene?"

Riko pouted her cheeks.

"I just got Ki-kun's consent. Weren't you watching? Ki-kun removed his finger that's keeping my uniform on. It was 3 seconds scant and Ki-kun could have been engrossing himself with my breasts!"

"E-Engro...!?"

For the Aria who has no tolerance with these kind of topics, she obviously has become agitated. She trembled insofar she might drop the gun she's holding.

Hey, what are you imagining?

"That's right Aria. No man can resist the temptation of a girl's breasts. Oh, right..."

Smirk. Riko sardonically narrowed her eyes, and continued,

"There may be an exception."

...then looked at Aria's flat-surfaced chest.

Aria's jaw dropped.

Her sudden loss of words was probably caused by too great of a shock.

Aria's brows instantly shot up.

"T...T-That's it... You asked for it! I'll make an airhole in your face!!"

Bam! Bam! Bam!!

Aria repeatedly stamped her foot on the bed.

Whoa, take it easy there! You're gonna hit me!

"Not only breasts. Riko knows a lot of things that guys like which I learned from playing a lot of games. Riko, unlike the grade-schooler Aria, is a master of pleasuring men."

Riko put two index fingers above her head to form horns.

"I was gonna put it into practice, but here you came and interrupted me. I'm so mad. Rawr!!!"

Then... Riko threw the pocket watch that she had been holding into the air.

"!!!"

The pocket watch before Aria's eyes...

Boom!

Turned into a mini-sized sun.

The flashbang filled the entire room with white.

---We've been had!

Flash Grenade.

A device that contains alloy powders of aluminum, titanium, and magnesium. When detonated, the ingredients create a chain reaction that will emit light and the sound of an explosion to neutralize the combat effectiveness of foes. In the Assault department, it is a popular weapon of choice for support. It seemed this one was an improved version from the absence of sound.

According to what I had learned from my lectures, any person who has directly seen the blast will be momentarily blinded and stunned. You can then take advantage of that chance. However in this case, it was us who had the advantage taken.

"Kyahh!"

Even the S-Rank Aria couldn't oppose the reaction of her body. Her body relaxed and slumped down.

You can guess what will happen. My face was squashed by Aria's butt.

After a few seconds, Aria regained control and got up to her knees.

"Ri-Riko! Where did you go!?"

Thanks to Hysteria Mode, I regained control as well sooner than I thought. I got up and scanned the room but Riko's figure is nowhere to be seen.

"There had been no traces of opening or closing the door, I think."

I remarked and checked the window. From above, I saw Riko's figure elevating herself towards the roof of this building (all-girl's dorm), using a dynamic grappling hook.

"I found her! She's heading towards the roof!"

"Let's go after her Kinji! I'll make her pay for insulting me. A thousand airholes won't be enough!"

We had a talk while we were ascending the emergency stairs. According to Aria, she coincidentally came across Mutou and Shiranui and they had told her: 'It's fine bringing Kinji in to a girl's dorm, but make sure the teachers won't know about it'. This event happened some time after I was asked by Riko (who was disguised as Aria back then) to come to the said place.

Aria found it odd. She promptly asked Informas for info and investigated the girl's dorm in question. She saw me through a surveillance monitor, and soon ferreted out my location.

This supreme intuition and initiative, is what you expect from the descendant of the Great Detective Sherlock Holmes.

"Riko!!"

Bam!

Aria kicked the door to the roof. Up there--

Was Riko, perching herself on top of the roof's fence with her feet kicking back and forth like a child.

The full moon glittered in the night sky.

The moonlight lit up Riko's bewitching smile.

"Ahh... Tonight is a good night. There's a guy, there's also the smell of gunpowder. I like both a lot."

Riko moved her gaze. Those eyes that reflect the moonlight seemed like it left a trace.

It's the eyes of a predator with prey in front of her.

It is the same eyes I saw from that hijack incident.

"Riko Mine Lupin the 4th, I will apprehend you this time! I'll make you atone for my mother's false charges!"

Aria aimed the white-silver Colt Government towards Riko.

Kanae Kanzaki, Aria's mother, the same woman in the cameo engraved on the grip of Aria's gun, had been framed by the I-U organization.

Aria went around the world in pursuit of that organization.

And finally-- met Riko Mine Lupin the 4th. One of I-U's members.

"Make me if you can, Limey."^[1]

Riko grinned, showing her white teeth. She jumped off of the fence and landed on the roof.

"I'll make you, Frog."^[2]

The two slandered each other with weird nicknames.

And thus another 21st century Anglo-French battle between Holmes and Lupin began.

Not to ruin the atmosphere but as a Tohyama descendant, Japan (in other words, myself) will also be participating.

The moment when the heavy June clouds concealed the moon...

Riko started.

She's fast!

"Kinji! We'll go for Aru=Kata battle. Cover me from a distance."

Aria ordered, firing two shots as she charged towards Riko.

Riko evaded the first wave of bullets by sidesault, however, by doing so risked crossing with Aria at the center of the roof.

Landing sound.

Riko did a moonsault subsequently and flew over Aria's head.

The ransel that Riko has on her back opened in midair.

From inside appeared two hand pistols ---Walther P99, which she caught with her tiny hands.

Aria, swiveling her head, shot from behind. Riko also fired after landing.

Four gunshots were heard.

Both bullets passed by both sides.

Their gunfire lit up the darkness of the night like a stroboscope.

(Aru=Kata battle, huh...?)

Close quarter combat between Buteis is different from a normal gunfight. One of Butei's laws prohibits killing by Buteis regardless of circumstance. And as battles between Buteis are inevitable, they circumvent this law by using a skill called Aru=Kata.

Each one wearing bulletproof armor as a premise, Aru=Kata is a skill that uses bullets as a blunt weapon instead of piercing.

Aria spun in place, and shot at Riko from a low posture. Following her body's movement, her long twin tail casted a duplex spiral around her.

"Hahh!"

Riko, as if to graze Aria's forehead, did another moonsault.

Riko landed behind Aria.

"I'm here~ Catch me if you can!"

"Y...You!!"

Aria rolled on the ground, and attempted to fire again...

However... *Kachin* *Kachin*

Her twin guns were out of ammo.

Aria's Colt has an advantage over Riko's Walther in terms of power, however, they lose in bullet capacity.

She released the magazine catch.

With gymnastic-like movement, she did a back-flip in the air with her petite body...

Locking sound

...and reloaded both at the same time with spare magazines hidden from under her skirt.

"How cute! Aria, your battle figure is so cute! I'm moe-d! Aria, moe!!"

Riko, who had pronounced those fast-paced words...

...was laughing.

That girl. She's enjoying this fight.

There were people like that in Assault section. But that adrenaline intoxicated countenance was an expression of a typical gun-monger.

"Entertain me more, chibi-chan! Don't let me get bored! Hahahaha!!"

"Don't make fun of me!"

The two figures continued launching fire at each other, keeping both sides in check. Bullets were released from the muzzle like rays of light. Yet, neither one had landed a successful hit on either side.

Honestly, I had never seen such a high level gunfight like this before. Using two guns, and furthermore, using Aru=Kata.

They're good, those two. Aria, who jumps off of the sofa in excitement in the midst of watching a TV animal show and Riko, who reads doujinshi hidden behind her textbook during class. You can't imagine that they are the same people.

From my observations, both are even.

The firing sound had ceased.

Both sides must have used up all their ammunition. They distanced themselves from each other.

Spinning both handguns like a windmill, they placed them back in holsters under their skirts.

Subsequently... they respectively drew double kodachi and double knife.

"By the way. I didn't notice this until now because of your ugliness."

..said Aria, forcibly stretching her back to look down upon Riko.

"You put back your hairstyle as it was before."

She was probably striking back from being called Chibi a while ago by throwing a sarcastic remark.

Aria was talking about having severed part of Riko's hair during the hijacking incident. Riko's hairstyle was, like Aria's, twin-tailed. However, only a part of them was tied. Riko was using the hairstyle that she had before.

"Look carefully, descendant of Holmes. The tail got shortened a bit, and it's all of your fault."

Aria laughed purposefully on Riko's words.

"Oh, my apologies."

"You said it, Chibi."

"What's that, ugly-face?"

"Chibi! Chibi!"

"Ugly-face! Ugly-face! Ugly-face!"

"Chibi! Chibi! Chibi! Chibi!"

"Ugly-face! Ugly-face! Ugly-face! Ugly-face! Ugly-fweeh..!!!"

Aria bit her tongue.

I commented silently.

Now was a good time. I pulled out a handgun with one hand and whipped out a butterfly knife with the other.

Some time has passed since I entered Hysteria Mode, but due to watching the fight between the two wearing skirts without short leggings, it hadn't left me yet.

Aria and Riko's attention was fixed on each other. Using that chance, I closed my distance to them. Bending my knees to have the same level as their small height, I wedged myself in-between them...

Clashing sound

Aria's kodachi clashed the non-sharp edge of the butterfly knife that was in my right hand, and at the same time, I pointed the Beretta in my left hand at Riko's side.

"...Kinji!?"

Aria, baring her fangs, shouted in surprised because of my unexpected action.

Riko just said, "Hmph!"

I looked down, avoiding meeting gazes with the two, and said...

"This is sad."

...in a low, sorrowful voice different from my usual tone.

"Ha!"

I can hear Aria gasp. Her heartbeat throbbed clearly as if you could hear it say, 'Dokun'.

"K-Kinji!! Y-You're in that thing again...!?"

This is the fourth time she had seen me in Hysteria Mode.

Aria had noticed my transformation. And as if a natural reaction to this, she started blushing.

Does my Hysteria Mode really cause such an embarrassment?

"Hold back for now Aria. Besides, it's not my hobby watching two lovely kittens fighting each other."

I took a side glance at Aria. Her lips stammered speechless words. She wanted to say something but couldn't.

"K...K-ki...k-kitte...tte..?"

She let out a voice that couldn't form a word.

The grip on her kodachi was gradually losing strength as well.

This girl should be fine. Let's move on to the next one.

"...Riko."

Riko replied no answer to my call.

"A half-hearted affection and a half-hearted fight. Don't you think both are kinda dull?"

Riko wasn't really serious.

If she were, she should have used her hair as an ultimate weapon, the same weapon that she used during the hijacking incident. She should have made Aria suffer more.

However, she didn't. Why was that?

I questioned Riko with my gaze.

Riko opened a distance from us. Her eyes were filled with sorrow.

"Half-wrong. Riko is serious about Ki-kun though."

Riko shook the ransel and opened the cover. She picked up the two knives dropped on the ground without looking. She shook her head, put the knives inside the bag, and closed the cover.

The wind slightly fluttered her loose perm hair.

"But half-correct. As of now, I am not in a perfect condition to fight seriously. That's why it's not the right time yet to settle things with Aria."

"I see."

I stretched my knees. Spinning the butterfly knife with my hand, I concealed the blade part.

"Aria, refrain from fighting Riko for now."

"K-Kinji!? D-did Riko brainwash you or something!? Why are you stopping me!?"

Aria snarled. She must be making a hasty conclusion that I switched sides.

"I don't want you to commit a crime, Aria."

"As expected of Ki-kun! You understand the situation well! Do you get it now, Aria?"

Riko clapped her hands as she did a one-spin in place.

The hem of her skirt floated up as if to ridicule Aria.

"Not only are our bodies perfect for each other Ki-kun, our hearts are as well!"

"Isn't it?", smiled Riko, just tilting her head to look at me.

Aria, perplexed by the conversation that is happening between us, made an anxious expression.

"Commit a crime? What do you mean by that, Kinji?"

Glare

The gaze from her camellia eyes sharpen.

She hadn't sheathed her kodachi yet, but she seemed to choose to hear out my part first.

"Plea Bargain. Am I right?"

"That's correct! I have already made a plea bargain regarding that April incident. Kyaha!"

Plea Bargain.

It is a common agreement in American law that if the criminal agreed to cooperate in various things that help solve cases, like helping in criminal investigation, confessing accomplices, etc, it will abate their punishment. It is a law that diminishes, if not completely erases their crime.

This compromises fairness of course, as this law risks people giving false testimony, or framing up other people in return to escape their predicament. It is a dangerous system, but it has been implemented in Japan recently due to inability of handling the influx of crimes.

"In other words, if you arrest me, it will be a false charge!"

Tsk, tsk.

Riko clicked her tongue as she swayed her upward-pointed index finger from side to side.

In reaction to this, Aria, that is in front of Riko...

...gnashed her teeth. The hands holding the twin kodachi trembled in anger.

"That can't be true! Do you think you can pull my leg with that joke?"

"It might be true, it might be not. Who knows? Right now, we can't confirm that."

I stopped Aria for the reason that if Riko had already done a plea bargain and we continued fighting her, we will be accused of assaulting and illegally arresting her.

If that happens and we were sued, we won't be able to save Kanae-san. I will also lose the chance to talk to Riko to extract information regarding Nii-san.

Aria seemed to understand that.

Although letting out a vexed grunt, she somehow managed to restrain herself.

(I'm sorry for this, Aria.)

There is the plea bargain thing, but the main reason I stopped you is because Riko knows things about my brother.

About that, I am truly sorry.

I atoned inside my heart as I felt the Hysteria Mode leaving my body.

Still, it didn't stop Aria from pointing the blade towards Riko.

"But the false crime brought about my mother is a different issue, Riko! I'll have you testify in Supreme Court!"

"Sure."

"And if you don't cooperate, I'll make you do it by forc... E-eeehhh!!?"

Aria opened her eyes wide from Riko's unexpected acquiescence in the middle of her speech.

"I'll testify."

"R-really!?"

Riko spoke the second time. Aria, although dubious, couldn't hide her joy.

Basically, Aria doesn't know how to doubt people's words.

She's the type that will be deceived by bad men until she hits rock bottom.

"Aria, you really love your mama. Riko too, loves her mother as well... That's why I can understand. I'm sorry Aria. Riko... Riko..."

Saying those words until that, Riko concealed her face.

"Mother.. Mother... Fuwee..."

Drip. Drip.

Glittering tears started dropping by her feet.

"...Waaaa.. Waaaaahhhhhh...."

Riko suddenly wailed.

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

Seeing that Riko, Aria...

"E-eh? Eh!? Eeehh!!?"

Couldn't comprehend what was happening in front of her, Aria was flustered.

She made a troubled face like, "What!? Did I make her cry?"

"W-wait a minute! Why are you suddenly crying? Come on, tell me."

She hid the short daggers on the back of her uniform. Probably stimulated her motherly sensation, she pacified Riko. Her voice became gentle.

Really, she's the type that is easily fooled.

Hey Aria, look carefully. Riko has a grin on her face.

But well, whatever the case, this had erased the presence of fighting for now.

The case is closed for the time being.

(Riko... what is your true intention?)

I knit my brow at Riko, who was being patted by Aria on the back, while letting out a sigh of relief.

Why did Riko nonchalantly appear before us?

As if to answer my doubt, Riko, while crying, spoke...

"Riko... Riko was expelled from I-U because of Aria and Ki-kun's doings. Not only that, I lost my precious treasure after losing to Vlad."

The atmosphere surrounding us suddenly became tense.

I turned to Aria. Upon hearing that, Aria's eyes smoldered with killing intent.

"...Vlad? You mean that 'Endless Sinner Vlad'...? Isn't that I-U's number 2!?"

Number 2...?

"Yes. I want to retrieve the treasure that was taken from me by Vlad. That's why I'll ask you two Please help Riko."

Riko looked at us with teary eyes.

"Help...? How, in particular?"

I asked Riko.

Riko, wiping the tears with the back of her hand the second time, continued with a deliberate monologue, "Don't cry Riko. You're a strong girl. So smile, just like the usual cheerful you."

With the full moon appearing again from the dark cloud in her back---

"Ki-kun. Aria. Let's---"

Regaining her smiling face, Riko continued,

"---become thieves together!"

2nd Ammo: High Butei Riko

Juvenile Act. Information regarding the crime committed by underage criminals will not be disclosed in public.

It is prohibited for Buteis to leak the information to other Buteis. Except for the victim and a limited number of judicial officials, no one can know the details of the crime.

Since the details won't be publicized in the media, they'll just ended up being reported as 'Boy A did this' or 'Girl B had done that' or something similar.

This is clearly a bad law so officials have proposed for the repealing of this law. But it was denied because the proponents argued that it was a consideration for Human Rights and what not.

That's the reason why Aria and I haven't told anyone about that hijacking incident.

Even though we disagree with the law.

So the next day, after the 'General Subject' class periods, ^[3]

"I'm back!!"

Riko, with her frill-customized skirt, appeared in class 2-A. The whole class reveled in joy upon Riko's return.

(T-That girl...)

With an unpleasant mood, I discreetly asked one of my Inquesta classmates. According to them, Riko took part in a long-term, top-secret crime investigation in America since April. And today, she just came back.

My guess is that Riko was the one who had spread that information herself.

After all, she's a very shrewd girl.

"How are you guys doing! Did you miss Rikorin?"

She stood behind the podium as she said that. In reaction, the entire dumb class began to throng in joy around her. I should remember the order of the people who ran up to Riko. That is definitely the Class 2-A stupidity

ranking. Look at those guys swaying both upwards hands and shouting, "Rikorin! Rikorin!". Maybe I should consider severing my friendship with them.

Well... Whatever.

Not that I can't understand them--- they are oblivious of the fact that Riko is actually the 'Butei Killer'. Ignorance is bliss, is what they say.

Riko, if you look at the outside appearance, is a bishoujo. That frilled skirt makes a portion of the guys cry in joy. Don't ask me. I have no idea what's good about it.

"Riko-chan, welcome back!! Ah, what's that?"

"Ehehe~ I tried following the season's trend!"

Riko is carrying the red ransel on her back. On the side of the ransel is a dangling **teruteruboozu**. She sways it as she shows it to the class. Meh, what a sorry girl. Contrary to my knitting of brows, the girls shouted, "It's cute!!". They liked it.

This is where the problem lies.

Riko is the class mascot. In other words, she's the popular girl.

Her personality is bright. She acts stupid as well so boys and girls treat her openly.

Suppose I tried warning my classmates here saying, "Watch out for her." I, who has been nicknamed by girls as 'Gloomy', or 'Inept', or the recent one I got for some reason, 'Lady Killer', they would lend no ear to my words. Even though they had been deceived unknowingly by that fake smile of hers, they would take Riko's side.

In other words, the whole class is Riko's ally.

Clearly, Aria and I are at a disadvantage.

""*giggle* You should join us too, Ki-kun!"

Riko did a beckoning gesture. I let out a snort and looked the other way. I heard something breaking beside me. When I turned to the direction of the sound, there was Aria, trembling in anger with a pencil in one hand split in half.

Aria, I understand your feelings.

But please don't vent your anger onto your property.

You should treasure your property.

Why? Because I, your slave, am included in your property category.

School ended. Aria and I made our way back home.

"Ahh!! She really gets on my nerves! Hampf..."

"Same."

"Sometime soon I'll give her the punishment she deserve. Hampf..."

"Oh, get her girl! Do it!"

"And then... hampf... hampf... I'll throw an airhole hell in her face, hampf..."

"That's one scary-sounding hell... but hey Aria, you should stop now. You'll upset your stomach."

"Swhut hwup!"

Aria, sitting in the sofa hollered. For each 'hampf' = 1 peach bun stuffed in her mouth. She stuffed too many buns insofar as bean pastes were stuck around her mouth. That lack of etiquette is unlike that of an English noble.

I don't want to anger her and face airhole hell instead, so I gave up worrying about Aria's stomach.

Aria continued on gobbling down buns that I bought from the Matsumoto shop like there's no tomorrow.

Finally, the paper bag became empty. She crumpled it into a ball and threw it behind her.

Hey, the wastebasket is just beside you!

Of course I am not a stupid enough person to voice that out loud, so I just stuck the words in the back of my throat.

Aria folded her arms and her legs, with her expression like that of an active volcano on the verge of eruption, or an out-of-control reactor just before meltdown.

I was sitting on the L-shaped sofa the farthest distance possible away from Aria. With a feeling like I am facing a mad demon...

"So, is that fine with you? Riko wants us to be her accomplices in some sort of theft."

...I asked Aria with a sigh.

After that fight, Riko had explained the details of what we're going to do. She needed to do some investigation first, so we were asked to wait for a week or so.

"Of course not. Holmes joining hands with Lupin? That's unheard of! But right now, circumstances are circumstances."

Aria shook her head. Her long, pink twin-tail swayed casting curves.

"Riko said she'll testify for mama's trial so I think it's fine to do it if I think of it as a necessary evil. Also, isn't it written in the Bible: 'Love thine enemies'?"

And for your information, written in the Bible as well is: 'Thou shalt not steal'.

"It's fine being open-minded. But don't forget stealing is an indubitable crime. It'll stay on your record. Well, not that all Buteis are 'clean' anyway... only a minority of them. Are you saying this on top of your resolve?"

I can guarantee Aria that. Why? Because I am also one of them, for carrying an illegally customized Beretta.

"You don't need to worry about that. This can't be considered a crime."

"...And why is that?"

"Riko mentioned Vlad, right? Vlad is I-U's number 2. It is beyond law jurisdiction when it comes to matters regarding I-U. Even if we get arrested for stealing, we'll never be prosecuted."

"W-What do you mean by that?"

I pressed for further details but Aria gave no response other than folding her arms behind her head.

3 seconds passed... 5 seconds...

Silence filled the room.

"Or rather..."

I stood up and slammed both hands on the table.

"Can you explain to me now what this I-U is? I get that it is some sort of secret organization or the likes but why is it that whenever I ask for explanation, you always end up sidestepping it? Even though it is temporary, right now I am your partner. Isn't it rude to freeze me out of this?"

"...No. I can't tell you."

"You can't tell it even to a partner, huh."

"Being my partner is exactly the reason why I can't tell you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll be erased if you hear it."

Erased...?

The heck!?

"...You mean, I'll be killed?"

"That's only a part of it. Your census register, residential info, bank account, student record, any kind of information connected to you and any other traces of your existence will be erased."

"What...?"

"I-U is an A-Class national secret in England. In Japan, it is an I-Class State Secret. If authority gained knowledge of your involvement in I-U, even just knowing about them, you will be pursued by Public Peace Zero Division or an Armed Prosecutor. You don't want that, right?"

...Public Peace Zero Division. Armed Prosecutor.

It is the most dangerous term that you can hear in Japan.

Both are ultimate jobs within the nation with members possessing a license to kill. It is the so-called 'Dark Government Official'.

Their strength is not a joke.

If I were targeted by them--- I doubt I could fight them evenly even under Hysteria Mode.

"Let's forget about that, Kinji."

When Aria saw me saying nothing, she continued on as if the previous topic didn't exist...

"What about you? What's your plan?"

"Huh? Ahh..."

Yet again she deliberately sidestepped the question about I-U.

"Hhmmmm... why did you want to help Riko that much?"

"That's... none of your business."

"Should I take it that you helped her just because she's a cute girl who cried and pleaded for help, then?"

"Where did you get that idea from? Wait, wasn't that you? And if anything can be solved with crying then there's no more need for Butei."

"Why is it then?"

The reason I lent a hand to Riko is--- to hear information regarding Nii-san.

I thought Nii-san died during the Uragaoki Sea Accident.

But that premise had been shattered because I was shown evidence of the possibility of his survival. From Riko's story.

...I want to confirm if Nii-san is alive or dead.

And if he is still alive, I want to find out the truth behind his disappearance. After all, his sudden disappearance had turned my life around. I want to meet him again, and talk to him directly.

For that reason, I had no choice but to cooperate with Riko, the only source of information that I have.

That is my current standpoint.

"Kinji? What's the matter?"

Aria knitted her brows from my sudden silence.

"Ah, nothing. As I said before, that's none of your business."

The case about Nii-san is my personal problem.

Besides, it is a problem that I sealed within me. Something that I do not want to expose to other people.

It is not something that I would want to talk about lightly. Even to a partner.

"---I know it, Kinji."

I lifted my head upon hearing Aria's riled anime-voice.

Know it...?

Know what?

"Hmph! I know it even if you don't say anything. Riko is a cute girl so guys can't resist her right? S-She has breasts too."

W-Wha...

This girl...

Aria is about to start something weird.

"There are three things that a Butei will fall to: darkness, poison and lastly, a girl. Last night in that room, R-Riko... d-did that thing to you..."

Glare

She's glaring at me intensely. Aria suddenly started flushing.

I don't know what's happening in her imagination but her face reddened like if you put power through a nichrome wire.

And then..

She bared her fangs. She pointed her finger to me like a detective saying, "You're the culprit!" to a criminal.

"R-Riko did something weird to you and you became her slave instead. Am I right!?"

.....

.....

.....

...What!?

"What kind of debauched thing did she do!? Confess everything!!"

"What the hell was that?"

"A-Answer me properly! W-What did she do to you!?"

"Wait! Hold up! Why do you want to hear it that badly?"

"Eh? Ah, that's because... Ughh... Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! You pink Butei!"^[4]

You're the color pink, you know. Hair-wise. Dropping that side remark, now I am certain that Aria had been peeping at us since Riko had sat astride on me.

And out of all things, she made an outrageous misconception.

"Listen... I don't know from which part you had began watching us, but nothing happened between us. It's all a misunderstanding."

"Liar!! Y-You were lying on b-b-bed with Riko! What's the explanation for that!?"

"I was forced to go there."

"Listen, Kinji. People have these parts called 'feet'. If you don't walk your feet there, you can't reach the bed. At least you went there with your own consent, and then walked towards the bed. That part is beyond doubt, isn't it?"

"T-That's... right, but..."

"See what I'm saying? Why did you casually go into that place? My guess is that you were expecting something indecent, eh? Just because Riko has got a bit more breasts, you're getting head-over-heels already. That's the worst! Why don't you give me an excuse, if you have one?"

T-That's...

Well, she's right. I was lured into that room... and walked to the bed with my own consent. But that's because I didn't know the other person was actually Riko.

Back then, Riko disguised herself as Aria.

If that's the case, then I went there because it was Aria? That's one feasible argument. No, no. That's not good at all, Kinji. Try answering "I thought it was Aria, that's why I walked to the bed myself." You'll be killed for sure.

Having trouble answering, I...

"Or rather, it's me who should be mad... Why are you so riled up with that!? Even if one out of a million chance that it is true, it's got nothing to do with you!"

...countered with a special skill called 'Reverse Snapping'.^[5]

"No, it does!"

With a flustered gesture, Aria brought her clenched fists closer to her chest.

...?

What has me getting pushed down by Riko in bed got something to do with Aria?

In response to my knitting of brow, Aria...

Like a child having a tantrum, and with closed eyes, she shouted:

"You're mine! I won't let anyone have you!!!"

My heart jumped from Aria's words.

No kidding. I thought it stopped for a few seconds.

W-What is this girl saying all of a sudden?

"...I don't know what Riko told you but..."

Glare

Aria glared me with a tearful eyes. Her face flushing red further.

"You are being deceived by Riko! I-It's written in the book that Shirayuki brought... G-Girls can't do that a-aggressive thing to the guy that they really like!"^[6]

Although stuttering from time to time, Aria did her best talking about the topic that she's not used to talking about.

What is wrong with her really?

While saying those lines, her gaze was shooting in every direction erratically, and she was also sweating mysteriously. What is happening to her?

Does she have a cold or something?

"W-What's the explanation behind that? Care to elaborate?"

"The Lupin lineage has a tendency of forming a party that were strictly chosen from exceptional people to commit thieving. That's what they were famous of! For sure Riko saying those words like 'your bodies are perfect for each other' means that... She plans to steal my slave with sexual charm, and add you to her party in the future! I will not... never! Going to let that happen!!"

Howled Aria with fangs bared.

"You're mine! (as a slave) That's why you can't serve other people, understand!?"

Ah, I see. It's all making sense now.

So that's what you mean by, "You're mine!".

I am her slave = her property = hers. Come to think of it, that's the only explanation.

Geez, I feel dumb getting excited for nothing. She's just demonstrating extreme possessiveness for things.

"A-Anyway, I'll forgive you this once... but there will be no second time, get it? Else I'll give you an airhole hell and transform you into a human lotus root!"

Human Lotus Root.

Aria coined another original phrase.

Maybe it's about time I ask the Informas to make a wiki of it.

"First of all, you're lacking in self-awareness! Basically, you're a 'Gloomy' person, but in reality you're quite a 'Lady Killer'. E-Even that time with Shirayuki... All you do is keep flirting with each other... from morning till night..."

Not satisfied with bringing up two of my nicknames, she even brought up past events as well.

This is what you call a displacement of anger, no doubt. She must be really pissed off by Riko to search for an outlet.

"Y-You even k-kissed Shirayuki! A-Although you did that to me as well..."

Grrr...

Aria growled.

As I get the premonition that Aria will soon turn into a demon, I get myself off of the sofa and used the excuse of going to the restroom.

"Uuuh... The rainy season's getting cold."

I mumbled as I put on the bulletproof vest for safety.

Hmm... My ability of avoiding danger had been fostered well from two months of living together with Aria.

(Speaking of Shirayuki... Isn't she in Shimane right now?)

I, who had miserably retreated to the toilet upon a sign of danger, recalled Shirayuki as I gazed at the handcrafted doorknob cover that she fixed.

Shirayuki is still at SSR camp in Izumo or what's-its-name Shrine. She'll be back by tomorrow afternoon.

By the way, I had been planning on making Aria and Shirayuki get along with each other, so last month when her Slave number 2, Shirayuki, had gone to camp, I complained to Aria saying, "Are you sure it's okay to let her go? Don't you think it's unfair for my part?". But she just trampled my

rebuke by answering, "You and Shirayuki have a different education agenda, so it's fine."

According to Aria, training Shirayuki's supernatural powers is at utmost importance, and that training isn't something that Aria is capable of doing, so she'll be entrusting the job to the professionals.

In other words, our master Aria-sama intends in solely educating me to be her slave. Ohh, I am so grateful that my eyes are in tears. How about forget training me and put that effort in training your height instead?

Like Aria, Shirayuki had been granted the approval of staying in my home as well. So she does not seem to have any objection in joining hands with Aria.

Although they originally had a cat-and-dog relationship, this particular way of keeping a certain distance from each other is how they get along with each other, with me in the center.

To put it in a simple sentence: it's a total nuisance.

(But Riko's case is entirely different from Shirayuki's, Aria...)

I folded my arms.

First of all, what triggered Aria and Shirayuki's quarrel was merely Shirayuki's unaccountable grudge for something. Moreover, despite everything, both are Buteis. Although they once had been in discord, when the fight with Jeanne d'Arc 30th a.k.a. Durandal happened, they properly united forces.

However---

Aria and Riko are different. Firstly, the two are Butei and a criminal. Secondly, their ancestors were rivals since ancient times: the great detective Sherlock Holmes and the phantom thief Lupin. Lastly, although Riko promised to testify for Aria's mother, it was originally Riko's fault that Kanae-san was framed. You can't blame Aria if she felt enmity.

She was requested by that person herself, and to do a larceny to boot. Aria doesn't know how to tolerate things that she doesn't like. Can she really accomplish this mission until the end? It's the question of the century.

(...It's probably impossible.)

Looking at Aria's usual behavior, she doesn't show any hint of perseverance.

In short, the position that I need to take is, make sure that Aria and Riko cooperate properly, and organize them together until the end of the job.

Me? Organizing those 2 'Quadras'...?

Will I be able to do that?

But... it's not the question of being 'able' or 'unable'.

I have no choice but to do it.

Honestly, even though I stay as Aria's partner, in the end, the thing about I-U is beyond my concern.

But this time... and only this time... I can't afford to ignore it.

As long as Nii-san's information is at stake, I will do whatever it needs to obtain it.

That's why I have to do it. No matter what the risks are.

Sigh.

---Another life or death situation.

The following day is the midterm examination.

The exam is split into 2 parts with lunch break in the middle. The first half is the 'General Subjects' written tests that were scheduled back-to-back this morning. The second half of the exam is the sports test. It is afternoon right now and we were taking the sports test.

The test is split into 8 categories. All must be taken until the end of exam. I sank down in one corner of the 2nd school grounds, where the test is taking place.

My head hurts watching the scenery before me.

(...They're not normal...)

The students are doing a 50 meter sprint and alternating side steps. What? Yeah, I know that's normal. But allow me to finish first.

What they are doing is normal. However, the students and the teachers participating aren't.

Let's introduce the supervisors of the exam, ---the teachers. They are, under the dismal sky, blowing a whistle, or swinging shinai (a wooden stick).

First, that girl that looked like a Hong Kong mafia leader is the Assault department instructor, Ranbyou. Students call her the 'Human Bunker Buster'. Her catchphrases are "Go die!" or "Death!". Next, that Ranbyou's best friend, the one always seen with a cigarette-ish thing in the mouth during the whole class period is the Dagula's instructor, Tsuzuri. That Snipe's instructor, Nangou, is known for beating students black-and-blue for the sole reason of standing behind her. The Lezzad's instructor, Chan Wu, seemed to be present as well. You can hear her voice but her figure is nowhere to be seen.

Anyone... please do something.

I just want to live a normal school life. And spending time studying under those inhuman instructors can't be considered a normal school life. Those students running and leaping as well, they're not normal at all.

There are the CVRs, or the Civetta Research. They are also known as the Special Undercover Investigation Department . Only peerless bishoujos can enter this course. CVR is a department that refines their sexual charm technique. Right now, they are wearing a high-cut bloomer in order to not leave a tan mark. Just merely watching them poses a big problem to my Hysteria Mode.

There's also the gun-armed Assault and the Lezzad. Not wanting to be separated from their guns even in this place. The use of the ground is free, so you can see the SSRs as well, doing a 1500 meter run wearing cloaks like usual. Oh? That one SSR... did she hover just now before landing from a high jump?

In general, Butei High is like this. Just watching them depletes my mental energy. Butei High is the home for a dangerous bunch.

Having a second look on this place intensely recalls my initial objective of transferring to a normal high school as soon as possible.

...However...

That objective... might change soon.

The reason why I decided to quit Butei was because of Nii-san's death.

But what if Riko's story is true? That Nii-san is still alive?

I...

...Wonder, what will I do?

Bang!

Gunfire blared. I looked to the source of the sound. There, I see Aria's figure doing a 50 meter sprint. It seemed the gunshot was used for the starting signal.

She's wearing a short pants and a PE uniform with '2-A Kanzaki' written on it.

Her twin-tail will probably get in the way of running. The wind swept her untied hair as she dashes forward.

I unconsciously formed a bitter smile at that figure.

She's small.

She's like a participant in a children sports event.

But.. I don't really dislike Aria doing what full-size girls do.

Her appearance outclasses that of full-size girls'. If she had the height and bust volume, it wouldn't be unusual if she were to be scouted by the CVRs. In other words, she's a peerless bishoujo.

However, after reaching the goal, witnessing Aria re-equipping her handguns that she had asked a junior to hold reminds me that she's not a normal girl after all. More like a battle girl.

I wonder what her plans are... After saving her mother, Kanae-san.

Will she continue studying as a Butei?

Or will she transfer to a normal high school? ...Probably not.

What if...?

What if we were classmates within the same normal high school?

What if we encounter each other again, but this time as a normal high school boy and a girl?

As I blankly contemplated those things, an image of a girl wearing a bloomer flashed at my vision. I quickly averted my gaze to the paper I am holding. It is the result sheet for the sports exam.

Dammit. Why can't the school have a separate test for guys and girls? Seriously.

What will happen if I accidentally turn into Hysteria Mode?

As I trace my Normal Mode's unremarkable grades with my index finger...

A shadow suddenly covered the result sheet.

"?"

I raised my head. As if sticking her head to mine to take a good look at the sheet...

"Uuwah... What kind of grade was that, dumb Kinji? Even your physical ability is dumb as well?"

...Aria sarcastically remarked at my grades. She's sipping a sports drink from a plastic bottle that is usually used in road racing for re-hydrating oneself.

I'm annoyed.

"Shut up. I don't want to hear that from someone repeatedly nodding their heads during Japanese and Kobun^[7] classes in struggling not to fall asleep, but suddenly blasting with energy when PE classes comes."

"There."



Aria sprawled her feet and sank down close beside me.

She must have probably sweated from that sprint. A gardenia-like aroma is emitting from her body.

I fixed my sitting. I distanced myself from her a bit.

Aria is quite indifferent when it comes to distance sensitivity.

To state it simply: It is problematic.

Even without that, first of all, boys and girls sitting close together are unthinkable.

We're not watching TV at home here, Aria.

You should learn the phrase, 'proper manner in proper place'.

"You really put some effort in running back there."

"Is that how I looked like?"

"Did you have someone you wanted to impress?"

"What kind of weed are you smoking, Kinji?"

.....

.....Huh?

Just now... I even asked the same question myself. I don't smoke though.

Why am I asking Aria such odd question?

...Why?

Aria hugged her tiny legs, leaned her head forward and started contemplating about something.

And then she looked to my eyes.

"I guess... it will be wonderful if my partner would recognize my ability."

Aria said that.

...?

This one makes me go, "huh?", too.

Because the old Aria would rather reply in this part, "I don't care even if no one recognizes me."

After taking the sports test...

Checking the test schedule of Inquesta department that I was enrolled in, I found out there is an optional biology quiz that students can take.

According to Mutou, who had taken the quiz earlier, the test was about materials that were not taught in the curriculum but... it was otherwise an easy test. Passing the quiz will net you 0.1 credits.

It might be inconsequential to other people but 0.1 credits is a big thing to me.

There are certain occasions that a Butei cannot attend classes because of a job request. Due to that, the condition of passing and graduating of students are decided by sufficiently fulfilling the credits needed.

When I was enrolled in Assault, I did job requests from local people and was absent in class quite a lot. That's why I was lacking a bit of credit, especially in Biology. This test was a windfall from God, and must not be passed up.

Once everything was decided, I changed to my school uniform and made for Inquesta's huge audio-visual room with an interior like that of a theater.

There weren't all that many people. During this time period, it seemed only Inquestas and Ambulaces were able to take the quiz.

But is it just me? The number of girls seemed strangely plenty. I'm not liking this.

I took a printout of the quiz and retreated myself to the very rear of the room to avoid the girls.

I am the only one in this row. Good.

Looking at the printout, it seems that we are going to watch an educational video about 'Genetics', supervised by a part-time instructor.

We will have to fill in the proper answer on the blanks. It won't be a problem as long as one is watching the video carefully.

I see. No wonder Mutou said it was easy.

"Everyone! Please go back to your seats."

A teacher clapping his hands said that.

Upon closer inspection, I see a group of girls surrounding the podium and causing a commotion where the instructor is.

It is the Ambulace part-time instructor, Sayonaki.

Now I get it. That explained the number of girls here.

I heard Sayonaki was a genius who had graduated from university abroad.

This part-time instructor, and also a genetics scholar, has an appearance of a 20 year-old guy. His face with glasses is clearly a handsome one. His slender waist goes well with his long hair. His other features are: tall height, sharp nose, and long legs.

To sum it up, he's an impeccable young man that appears in a trendy drama show.

His personality--- is gentle, like a saint. Plus, he is also very courteous. He uses **Keigo** with everyone. A rare type that you can find even in Butei High.

This Sayonaki, partly due to his tendency of working as part-timer, only shows up during special lecture events like this one. But whenever he does, what usually happens were girls always gather around him causing fuss.

The girls nicknamed him the 'Prince'.

To be frank, I don't agree with it. Why am I, over here, called 'Gloomy', and he over there is called 'Prince'? Even though we're the same harmless existence? Aren't you discriminating nondescript people too much?

Although I have not one bit of desire of becoming popular with the girls because of my constitution, I can't help but feel unfairness in those girls' actions.

People aren't all about appearance.

"C'mon everyone, go back to your seat. We can't start the video in this state. I won't give credit for those who remain unseated."

The girls reluctantly went back to their seats upon Sayonaki's words. They had no choice but to listen when credit is at stake.

Ha! Serves you all right.

Of course I didn't voice that out. I just laughed inside my mind. Suddenly...

"Darling~♪"

Riko, who came just now, occupied the seat on my left.

Her frill-customized skirt fanned out. It draped into my left hip as if covering it.

"R-Riko... what are you doing here?"

"Riko is also an Inquesta."

"I don't mean that! I'm asking why you intentionally took a seat next to me?!"

Riko took an upturned peek in my face. As I was about to voice my reprimand, the lights went out, turning the entire room into total darkness.

The video has started.

"Genes. It carries information about parent's traits that can be inherited by the offspring. Let's talk about the physiology of it."

The narrator's voice echoed. Riko grabbed my left arm and hugged it.

Muni. A soft sensation, like a dream, pushed down against my arm--- I tilt my body, to avoid that voluptuous part.

"What are you trying to pull!?"

"Ki-kuun. Want to touch Riko?"

"W-Why do I have to do that!?"

"Because I want you to touch Riko."

"That's not answering my question! Why are you suddenly asking me such---"

"Feel Riko up to your heart's content! You are free to touch Riko anywhere. No restrictions."

From Riko, who's leaning her body towards me, emitted a vanilla-like aroma. I restrained my breathing to show my resistance.

"W-We're in the middle of taking quiz. What will you do if the teacher catches us?"

"That thrill spices up things more," she chuckled. "Riko is such a bad girl."

Riko rubbed her face on my arm.

"Stop that! Are you a kitten or something!?"

"Nya~~~ Nya~~~"

Riko curled her wrist, imitating a cat paw, and started scratching the air.

"Hug Riko, Hug Riko Ki-kuun... Hug! Hug!!!"

Riko started clinging her sock-wrapped feet on mine.

T-This isn't good.

W-What is this?

I can't quite make it out, but I have an odd feeling that I'm starting to enter Hysteria Mode.

But, it's still repressible.

There are other students and a teacher within this audio-visual room. Using that excuse, I somehow maintained my reason.

Endure. Endure it, Kinji.

I don't get why I have to face this misfortune. But nevertheless, endure!

"Ah, Ki-kun, you're holding it. Holding things in is bad for your body."

Swish.

Riko slumped her upper body sideways and drooped it into my lap.

This lolita-style, modified frilled-uniform is tickling.

"Pat my head."

"No way I'll do that, baka!"

"If you don't do that, Riko will scream. And then Riko will tell the teachers you did something weird."

"W...hat... did you... say?"

I turned pale. Riko, who is in my lap turned upward to face me. As a result, it looks like I was providing a lap-pillow to Riko.

"Rawr! I'm serious. Riko will scream in 5 seconds. Four~ Three~ Two~ One~"

"Fine, fine. I'll do it!"

No choice.

I grabbed Riko's head as if clutching it. My fingers buried under her waving honey-colored hair.

"Ahn. It hurts Ki-kun. Do it more gently..."

Riko's hair was softer than I thought. It's not that glossy compared to Aria's hair. The tips of her hair were scattered about, as if done in mischief. However, that feature resembled Riko instead.

Dammit.

It is vexing to admit, but this girl is cute. In a general point of view though.

Pat. Pat.

I continuously patted Riko's hair out of desperation. Riko narrowed her big round eyes in reaction. Her face displayed extreme euphoria.

"Nn... That's perfect. But a little bit slower."

Pat. Pat.

"More, more!"

My face had flushed seeing Riko who had transformed into a child. I continued doing my work.

Pat... Pat...Pat...

Pat... Pat...Pat... Pat...

If Aria saw me doing this, she'd execute me seven times.

Afuhh. Riko let out a rapturous sigh as if she had turned into an angel.

"There was a certain party where the actress Marilyn Monroe had asked Professor Einstein: 'With my looks and your brain, don't you think our kids would be wonderful?'. In response to Marilyn's proposal-like question, Einstein answered: 'I disagree. There is a possibility that our kids might inherit your brain and my looks instead.' This joke had provided us a hint to study 'Inheritance' and 'Disinheritance' of the genes."

The narration continued, followed by the sound of pencil scratching.

(...Oh, no!)

Looking around, the students are all writing the answer in the printout.

This is bad.

If I don't start filling in answers now, although it is meager, I'll miss the credit for this quiz.

If that happens and I become unable to meet the credit criteria, I wouldn't be able to transfer to a normal high school, or worse, I might even repeat a year.

I flusteredly grabbed for my pencil and...

Hmm? Where's my pencil?

I know I put it down above my desk.

"*chuckle* Are you looking for your pencil? It's playing hide-and-seek~."

Riko, above my lap, whispered.

"Did you steal it!? Since when!?"

"Riko is a thief. There is nothing that she can't steal."

"Give it back!"

"Sure~"

Riko stretched her back and projected her chests. J...Just what the hell is this girl planning?

My eyes were about to fall off after noticing something.

My pencil was jammed in between Riko's voluptuous breasts, with a volume disproportionate to her small stature.

S-She hid it between her breasts.

"Take it out Ki-kun~"

"T-Take it out? I can't do that!"

"C'mon. Hurry up, or the video will finish! The V-I-D-E-O!"

Riko devilishly smiled. She spelled the word VIDEO and clapped her hand on every letter.

The hell! I can't believe this girl.

However, I have no choice but to do it... For the credit...!

I turned my head away from Riko's white skin, almost transparent enough that you can see her veins.

With the feeling that I was about to disarm a time bomb, no, maybe even more dangerous than that, I plunged my right hand inside Riko's uniform.

Rustle *Rustle*

Aahhh!

Dammit. It's soft. And it's warm. What is this?

"Hhn... By the way, Riko isn't wearing a bra right now."

Stop telling unnecessary things! You're just making things worst!

Endure... Endure it Kinji!

Don't Hysteria...

Rustle *Rustle*

I fumbled inside Riko's chest. Because I wasn't looking directly, I couldn't confirm where I am touching. Ah, is this it?

"A-Ahhnn. Ki-kun! T-That's...!!"

Riko seriously let out a desperate voice. I pulled out my hands in perplexity.

"W-What happened!?"

"Ki-kun! I didn't know you were so bold! That one just now, even Riko was shocked."

Why was she shocked? That was just the eraser's butt I touched.

"But don't worry, Ki-kun. Riko doesn't mind whatever you do to her. She doesn't mind at all. That's why, let's try harder one more time?"

"...Why? Why do I have to do my best on this...?"

"This is one way of training you to use Riko as a switch for your Hysteria Mode. In order to complete our mission, you will need to turn into Hysteria Mode at the right time."

So.. that's... what it is...

But let's drop Riko's intention for now.

The important thing right now is my credit. In other words, retrieving the pencil.

I turned my head away from Riko's chest the second time. I grit my teeth and reinserted my hands in Riko's chest.

My hands were enveloped by a marshmallow sensation from Riko's cleavage.

At that moment---

Flick

The lights turned on.

".....?"

When I looked in front, towards where the screen is, the words 'The End' were displayed.

...I-It's over already...?

I gasped--- I turned towards the presence of a person.

Sayonaki was standing in our side.



I failed to notice him because my attention was on Riko.

Due to the stagecraft of the room, the other students in the front couldn't see what the people in the back are doing. However, Sayonaki can witness clearly that my hands are inserted inside Riko's uniform.

"H-Here, sensei! Riko had finished answering everything! Well then, I'll see you! Bye bye, Ki-kun!"

Riko stood up, pushed the quiz sheet towards Sayonaki, and dashed away.

Dumbfounded, I watched that Riko. Her frilled skirt fluttered as she fled.

A vein in Sayonaki's temple popped out. His glasses glittering. Then he said,

"T-Tohyama-kun. Don't you know the phrase, 'proper manner in proper place'?"

I took a combo of Sayonaki's sermon and an instant make-up quiz that will be taken on a later day together with Repier and Amdo.

After that, as I walked to the exit lobby of the Inquesta building which I thought was already devoid of students, I found Riko loitering on one corner, PSP in hands. It seems she was waiting for me.

"Ah."

When Riko saw me, she stored the PSP inside her skirt and hid herself in the corner's blind spot.

And then, she half-showed her face from the corner and looked at me as if asking, "Are you still mad about earlier?"

I ignored her and tried to pass through.

"Tehe~"

Riko said that and stuck out her tongue. She fisted her headtop in addition.

"...So, when will you start telling us the detailed instructions of what we need to do?"

I said petulantly and went for the exit. It's raining outside.

What a bad day. I didn't bring an umbrella.

...is what I thought. However...

Whisk

Riko lifted a hand over my head, opening an umbrella.

Even her umbrella is decorated with frills. It's Riko-like in my opinion.

...So?

"Riko will lend you an umbrella. Let's do Aiaigasa!"^[8]

I thought so.

"Unbelievable..."

"Ki-kun. People who don't use this umbrella will not be permitted in tomorrow's 'Operation Stealing' meeting."

"....."

Guess I have no choice but to adhere. For Nii-san's lead's sake.

I gave up and entered under the umbrella's cover with Riko.

But what is with that naming sense? "Operation Stealing"? Isn't that too plain?

"Riko is so happy that she can experience Aiaigasa with Ki-kun! Rain, rain, fall away! Fall away!♪"

No rain, go away.

I sighed, thinking, what if Aria saw the two of us walking the streets shoulder-to-shoulder? It's the worst situation.

However, that thinking is naive. I have completely forgotten.

...The correct question should be: What will happen if we were seen, by a worse person than Aria?

"*chuckle*. Ki-kun, you usually distance yourself from girls, but when alone together, you're very kind. You were gentle even in bed. Oh, by the way, who are you?"

Riko's voice suddenly switched into an icy tone in that last part.

She threw the umbrella overhead, grabbed my chest, and forced me to duck.

"!?"

The area where Riko's neck was a second ago...

Swoosh

...Japanese sword...? Its blade zipped through that area.

I immediately turned around. As I thought, that person is in there.

"S-Shirayuki!"

Shirayuki was standing there in her crimson sailor uniform.

In her right hand was an unsheathed sword, called Irokane Ayame. Her left hand is gripping a Chinese-style umbrella.

"...Step aside, Kin-chan."

I just remembered. She was supposed to be back by late afternoon from SSR camp.

Shirayuki Hotogi.

She is the president of Student Council, the head of gardening club, handicraft club, girls volleyball club, has a superhuman diligence, a black-haired Yamato Nadeshiko which is a rarity nowadays, and also a Miko...

But this problematic childhood friend of mine occasionally turns into a demigod berserker for some reason.

Wait a minute! That thing just now... if Riko didn't push me down, wouldn't that have cut my head as well!?

"Who are you~? To disturb the sweet sweet time between Rikorin and Ki-kun..."

Riko questioned Shirayuki like a minx girl.

Swish

Retaliating with a wicked-wife glance, Shirayuki swung her sword, sweeping the rain.

"I am Shirayuki Hotogi of SSR Department. And what about you, who are you? Doing an aiaigasa within these sacred learning grounds, that was envi... I mean, despicable! Can't you see that Kin-chan isn't liking it? Get away from him right away! That strike just now was your warning."

You cut off people's heads for a warning!?

"Eh? Why~!? Tohyama Ki-kun and Mine Rikorin are a couple, didn't you know? So there is nothing wrong with us doing aiaigasa."

Riko pouted her cheeks. She dexterously caught the umbrella with one hand. Its frills fluttered as it swirled down.

If you look carefully, Riko's wristwatch and umbrella... are connected by a thin piano wire. That wristwatch acted as a reel to draw back the umbrella.

"Cou...ple...? Aha, Ahahaha. It's true that weird girls appear during springtime. Don't you think so, Kin-chan?"

Ahahahaha. Laughed Shirayuki with eyes wide.

Spring? It's already the rainy season. But I do agree about the 'weird girls appearing' part.

You are included in there as well, Shirayuki.

"Fu, fufufu. Mine-san. Now is a good time to retract what you said."

A cross-shaped vein on Shirayuki's temple popped up, trembled. Her eyes were shut and her lips are forming a bitter smile, probably to display composure.

"Because Kin-chan and I... had already ki-kissed each other!"

"Ffpff... Just a kiss? Riko and Ki-kun had gone up to B."^[9]

"Biiiiiiiiii-----!?"

Shirayuki suddenly opened her eyes wide and screamed.

"T\$&^*HD ^&dsa^* &dhfD*&^ jgfD*^!!"

"Shirayuki! Snap back to your senses! And you, Riko! Stop saying needless things!"

My words... were ignored. Like a mute hollering at a deaf.

"For a mere second lover thief, you're getting full of yourself! I won't let you have Kin-chan! Have at you!"^[10]

Shirayuki trembled, pointing both Irokane Ayame and index finger towards Riko.

"Come. I'll show you what a real thief is like."

Riko belligerently smiled, taunting Shirayuki.

T-These two are serious...!

Murderous aura filled the raining grounds, making anyone around them shiver.

Shirayuki tossed away her Chinese-style umbrella. She took an upsword stance, and then charged towards Riko.

"Kufu!"

Seeing that, Riko, thrust her umbrella to her front as if it were a shield. The umbrella concealed Riko's figure from Shirayuki's vision.

"!?"

Bang!

A hole appeared near Shirayuki's toes, produced by a bullet, which successfully stopped Shirayuki on her tracks from advancing.

It seems the tip of Riko's umbrella was modified to fire like a gun.

Riko rolled the umbrella in the ground. It went around behind Shirayuki. And then...

Flap

It flipped up Shirayuki's skirt.

"Kyahh!?"

Shirayuki tossed away the Japanese sword in surprise, then she slumped down.

Thud.

The point of the Japanese sword pierced the tree on my side. Wah! That was close!

"Ohhh!! Yuki-chan is wearing black!! That's a big contradiction! For someone who has a name like Shirayuki!"^[11]

The umbrella that was lying on the ground, moved. It looked like it was following Riko. She grabbed the umbrella, then stroked it.

By the way... Who's Yuki-chan?

Ah. She meant Shirayuki.

"See you Ki-kun! I'll mail you later about tomorrow's schedule and meeting place!"

Chu!

Riko threw a flying kiss, skipping as she fled.

She's good at escaping. As expected from the descendant of Phantom Thief Lupin.

Result-wise, she was able to get away scot-free from both Aria and Shirayuki.

(But what about this one...?)

I timidly turned towards Shirayuki's direction.

She's still slumping down. Her face was flushed up to her ears. She's covering it with her both hands.

"Hic... Hic... Let me die!! I, the president of student council and a student role model had disgraced myself for wearing an obscene black panty in these sacred learning grounds... hic. I am not eligible as Kin-chan's wife anymore. Weehhhnnnn!!!"

Don't worry. No one is eligible anyway.

Since I was facing Shirayuki in the front and Riko had flipped up the skirt from behind, there is no way I could have seen her panties. Therefore, I have no way of confirming whether it was really black or probably a different color like white. However, it seems this incident was a great deal of shock to Shirayuki. She's so depressed that she couldn't stand up.

I couldn't possibly leave her like that under this weather so I had no choice but to carry her. Shirayuki said that she was not feeling well so she asked me to carry her to the Ambulance.

Ambulance building, 10th floor.

We entered a cramped room. It is supposed to be the infirmary room.

Huh? No one is inside?

Shirayuki had asked me to bring her here, so I thought there were Ambulances standing by.

"...Should we hit someplace else?"

"Y-Yeah."

My hands were occupied because I was giving Shirayuki a piggy-back. She turned the knob with her hands instead...

Hmm? Somehow, she mysteriously used force there.

"H-Huh?"

"What's the matter?", I asked.

"It won't budge. It seems we can't go out. Oh no! We're in trouble."

The way Shirayuki said that was kind of monotonous. She got off my back.

Eh!? You can stand now!?

"You can... walk now?"

"Y-Yeah. Thank you Kin-chan."

She bowed down. She bent her body at a 90-degrees angle. Afterwards, she fixed her bangs.

.....

Oh well.

Looking at the door knob, it's true that it was broken. The cause was the keyhole had sort of melted.

Ouch. I touched it and it was bizarrely hot. It was only an instant so I didn't get a burn.

What the hell is this?

"Really, we're in distress. The knob can't seem to be dislodged by using a gun. Even if we try to escape through the window, the length of the cable can only get us down up to 3rd floor. It is embarrassing, but should we scream for help?"

"O-Oh yeah! I just remembered! Right now, we're the only ones in this building."

"Why is that?"

"You see, Sayonaki-sensei said he'll be having a special lecture today, so all Ambulace students went out to attend the lecture... I think."

"You think? Why didn't you recall that sooner? Haah... Can't help it."

"I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"It's fine. You don't need to apologize that much."

No choice.

Hmm... How about asking one of my Amdo classmates for help? Maybe they can use a special tool to open the door up.

I took out my cellphone. As I was about to call a number...

"I'm sorry!!"

Shirayuki swiftly pilfered my cellphone. She ran off with it beyond the curtain-screened bed.

"H-Hey Shirayuki! What are you doing!? Give it back!"

Sshhhh

I brushed the curtain open.

Shirayuki was sitting **Seiza-style** on top of the bed.

She's clutching my cellphone with both hands, curling her back, posing like "As if I will ever give it back!"

But still... taking off those black strap shoes and even lining them up properly on the floor before sitting on bed, it's so Shirayuki-like.

"What's the matter?"

Shirayuki's black hair was elegantly curled down on the white bedsheet. She's looking down, her fringe covering her eyes.

"I... didn't have... a choice. I never thought Kin-chan-sama had another mistress..."

W-What...?

Shirayuki was talking under her breath. I couldn't quite make out what she's saying.

"...That's why I locked Kin-chan together in this room... Right now... Kin-chan is only mine..."

Did I hear a dangerous word mixed within that sentence?

"...And so I suddenly thought, I should just make a stunning fait accompli before going back to the Hotogis. A big one enough to overwhelm that second lover thief. I cannot afford to lose. Kin-chan is mine. Kin-chan is mine. Kin-chan is mine. Kin-chan is mine. Kin-chan is mine..."

"Shirayuki. What are you mumbling?"

I shook Shirayuki whose started mumbling those same words like a broken recorder.

"Y-Yes!?"

Shirayuki flusteredly raised her head. Although a bit surprised, she properly came back to her senses.

"Can I have my cellphone back?"

I put out my palm. In response, Shirayuki hugged the cellphone on her chest with both hands, shaking her head.

"More importantly Kin-chan-sama! I have two important things that I need to talk about!"

"...I'll listen if you promise to give it back afterwards."

"Of course! Umm... Okay, the first one, Kin-chan. I have investi... I mean, read your fortune."

...It might not be a mistake to say that she had investigated me as well. She must have known my schedule today since she had waylaid us in front of the Inquesta building. Well, voicing this doubt would only prolong the talk, so I decided not to ask.

"And then... I got an unusual result..."

"My everyday life is already unusual so it's not really surprising. And what was the result?"

"The result was: 'Kin-chan will encounter a wolf, a demon, and a ghost'. And this will happen soon..."

A wolf, a demon, and a ghost?

What the heck is that? Wolves are already extinct. Demons and ghosts are fictional entities.

Okay, I will accept supernatural abilities, but that's because I have seen them with my own eyes. However, I refuse to believe such things that haven't been proven by my own eyes. My world is different from yours, Shirayuki. I have no plan on saying goodbye yet to this modern society.

Still, Shirayuki's divination is always accurate.

Let's try putting more thoughts to it. The things that come to mind are...

Riko, with a wolf ear and a tail, saying 'RAWR!'.

Aria, wearing a tiger-striped bikini, impaling me with a demon horn-like hair ornament.

Shirayuki, clad on white clothes, floating in air like a white lady that appears often in ghost stories.

...Isn't this what it means?

"I understand. I will heed that warning just in case. What's the second one?"

"...Umm... Starting tonight, I will be returning to Hotogi for a while."

Eh?

"By Hotogi you mean, your parent's house?"

"Yes. Remember I broke a taboo due to the Durandal incident of late? I will head there for forgiveness. Plus there's also been a lot going on with the Hotogis lately. I think I will be gone for about a month."

"I see. Well, take your time. You can take longer than that if you want."

Yesss!! I did a victorious pose inside my mind. That means one less dangerous girl around me for a while.

But showing my joy here will just make Shirayuki sulk. Don't celebrate yet, Kinji. It's still early.

"That's all I wanted to tell you. By the way, it's getting cold in this room, Kin-chan. Ah, the heater is broken."

How did you know it was broken by just looking?

I thought and went around the bed to check it. She's right, it is broken.

"This heater... doesn't it look like it had been slashed by a sharp weapon?"

"It's cold, Kin-chan!"

"H-Hmm?? Yeah, well, it is rainy season after all."

The cold is tolerable. However, thinking that we were locked up in this room, enduring the cold would be quite stressful.

"Kin-chan! It's over if we get knocked out before help arrived, right!?"

Shirayuki unaccountably raised her voice.

She threw the blanket about her, covering her entire self. Now she looks like a turtle with the head inside the shell.

This girl... I think she's gonna start something weird again.

"Hey, Shirayuki. I don't mind you playing as turtle. But please give me back my cellphone..."

I plead to Shirayuki. She suddenly started doing something under the blanket. Rustling sounds can be heard from within.

After a few moments...

Shirayuki expelled her uniform's scarf from inside the blanket.

Butei School's girls uniform has an unusual design that you can find in this modern period because the scarf was fused with the tie. This sailor uniform was unexpectedly popular. It receives great acclaim even on the internet. However, production of it was restricted to Butei School. Its unusual crimson color stands out among other school uniforms, making differentiating Butei High from other normal high schools easy. ...Wait! No, Kinji. This isn't the proper time for that explanation!!

Why is Shirayuki taking off her scarf all of a sudden!?

Observing that with a pale face, the next one that appeared from inside... is her blouse.

"H-Hold a minute! Shirayuki! Why are you stripping!?"

"Eh? If we don't use our body to warm up each other during snow mountain crisis, we're gonna die!"

No matter how you think of it, that can't be the case here!

Aahhh!! It's her skirt this time!

"We're not on a snow mountain!"

My head was in total chaos so all I can manage to say was the natural reaction.

Suddenly, an iron chain extended from the blanket, wrapping around my waist...

"W-Whoa!?"

It's drawing me towards Shirayuki. Dammit, this power is not ordinary. She's probably using Kidoujutsu to amplify her power.

It's pulling me in...

"So what of it!? I don't care if I can longer be a Miko! Who gives a damn about Hotogi!?"^[12]

"Same to you! What the hell are you saying!? Let go of me!"

"Kin-chan-sama! I beg you to bestow me a fait accompli before I depart this place! Please! A fait accompli. Fait accompli. Fait accompli!!"^[13]

I, who was getting pulled by Shirayuki, almost reached the blanket. Oh no! It's gonna suck me in!!

Finally...

"Ouch!"

"Kyah!"

She must have been in a state of extreme excitement, Shirayuki erringly used too much force so as a result, her forehead clashed with mine instead.

She probably got struck dizzy, as the force from the iron chain wrapping around my waist was dwindling.

(Now's my chance!)

Not overlooking this opportunity, I applied the 'grounding' technique that I learned from Assault. I escaped the blanket cover, distanced myself from Shirayuki and bed, and landed on my butt.

The other end of the iron chain entangling me was sprawled near my feet. A moment later, my cellphone dropped to the ground.

I quickly stuck the cellphone inside my pocket.

"...?"

But then I noticed...

...that the blanket is on top of my head.

Which means.....?

I brushed aside the blanket in order to get a better look around the place.

"A-Ahh... Wait a minute!"



Shirayuki is pulling in the bed sheet to conceal her black undergarments.

Dazzling snow colored legs jutted out from the sheets. Its entirety almost evident.

She probably forgot to take it off, her socks are still intact.

I stood up. Not even extricating myself from the entanglement, I grabbed the end of the iron chain.

As I thought, she's beautiful. Shirayuki is definitely fit to be called a bishoujo.

"...!!!"

(...This isn't good! I'm entering Hysteria...!)

This is dangerous. I am starting to feel the blood flow becoming like Hysteria's. At this rate...

Think. What if I Hysteria'd here with Shirayuki and she asked a weird favor from me? That's the Hysteria me, like a genie in the lamp, who cannot decline any girl's wish. It will spell irrevocable things.

"A-Ahh... Please don't stare at me that much... The lights are still on... B-But if Kin-chan-sama desires it... you can look... up to your heart's content..."

Which is it!?

I butted in a side remark inside my mind towards Shirayuki, whose face was as red as a red traffic light.

I pressed my back against the only escape route I have... the window.

"Kin-chan-sama!! Please...! The continuation..."

Shirayuki presented herself to me as if she was a fresh-served dinner that wants to be eaten. I stared at the iron chain and decided to endeavor this sink or swim escape method that I have thought up.

"A-Alright. I got it, Shirayuki. You too. Don't stare at me that much. This is also embarrassing for me."

"I-I got it...? Then that means Kin-chan-sama, you finally...!?"

"Quickly. Lower your head!"

"Y-Yes! Arff!!"

Shirayuki obediently followed the order I gave to her. What she did was not even duck, more like throwing herself down.

Good. It's all going according to plan.

"L-Let me know once you're done taking it off!"

What do I need to take off? I think to myself.

I turned my back to Shirayuki, opened the window, and climbed through.

"---Ehh!? Kin-chan! This is the 10th floor, you know!? You can't get down with a cable!"

"I know. That's why I'm borrowing this!"

I stuck the end of the grappling hook to the window. Gripping the iron chain with my hand, I abseiled down along the walls of the building using the form that I learned from Assault. I made it down to the 3rd floor...

Hanging myself at end of the cable, I connected the cable's end to the other end of the iron chain.

Descending along the lengths of the iron chain, I finally reached the ground.

...Phew.

I wouldn't call it a smart method but... it somehow did the job.

"Kin-chaaaaan! Let's do the continuation after I come back from Hotogi! You hear that? The continuation! It's a promise!!"

Looking up to the 10th floor window, Shirayuki is shouting those words using a megaphone in hand.

After that incident, I heard that Shirayuki departed for Hotogi Shrine in Aomori.

On my way home after that, Shirayuki was flooding my cellphone with mails.

It was scary so I didn't have the courage to count how many, but around 30.

The contents of the mail started as a spam of "I'm sorry", and then swapped midway into the 'continuation' or whatever that Shirayuki was saying back in that room. According to Shirayuki, it turned out that I agreed to do that 'continuation' when she returns.

(...Did I say anything like that...? I was desperate at that time so I can't really remember...)

That last part, she must have been looking forward a lot. The content was filled with heart marks. I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

Or rather, what should I do when she returns? I have no idea what she'll do to me but if I try to escape again, she will seriously lock me up this time.

"What are you making a crying face for, Kinji? We're going in."

I raised my head from Aria's voice.

Looking at the unfolding scenery beyond the door's small window only intensified my depression.

So this is what 'out of the frying pan, and into the fire' means.

...this is Akihabara. Also a town that Butei never frequent.

Akihabara is crowded with people all the time, so the use of firearms is out of the question. Not only that, its alleyways are convoluted that it makes chasing criminals a pain. It seemed Riko had completed the preparation for this 'Operation Stealing's meeting, and for some reason this is where the meeting will be held.

Like Aria, I also have no familiarity with this place so we got lost for a while before arriving at this shop. Aria was displaying astonishment and impression all the time being her first time here. While walking, for some reason, people had been looking at Aria and whispering remarks like: "It's a twin-tail!", "Look at that **ahoge!**", "No way! It's Miku!"^[14]. Aria couldn't make heads or tails of what they were saying so she had a "???" face all the while. Don't worry Aria, you're not the only one.

"...Let's go."

Experiencing the same sensation that I felt back when I infiltrated a criminal's headquarters during my Assault mission, I grabbed the door handle. Aria, who had stood in tiptoe to take a look of the interior through the small window, moved beside me.

And with a nervous countenance, we nodded to each other. We both steeled our resolve.

Gacha

We opened the door and...

"Welcome back, Master and Milady!"

Yes. This is what Japanese people call--- maid cafe, where Riko set up the meeting place.

The entrance to the cafe lies in a landing of a narrow stairs where escape route is unavailable ---Actually, I was suspicious that this might be one of Riko's traps that we're gonna be assaulted upon entering, but needless to say, it ended up as an unnecessary worry.

We were welcomed cordially.

Maid Cafe.

I have heard the name in TV or internet but... it is my first time actually entering the place.

So they really do serve customers in maid uniforms, huh.

Still, what an awkward place. If I had the choice, I would rather go for the criminal's headquarters instead.

Kinji, you did a good job. Your bravery for entering this place is acknowledged. So, can we go home now?

"...I-It's the same greeting as in my hometown... I never expected I would hear it in Japan..."

Aria beside me is also making a difficult face. Good. She's also one of the denizens of this side of the world. ^[15]

The maid ushered us to the very inner private room. Astounded at the waitress who was smiling at me in her breast-highlighted maid uniform, Aria pinched my ear and forcefully pulled me down the seat.

The interior's foundation is a mix of white and pink color. In other words, it is decorated girlishly. Oh god, nothing can be more uncomfortable.

Aria immediately folded her arms after the maid left.

"...W-What's with those breasts, I mean, that uniform!? Even though they pay their employees well, that's out of the question. If this were England then that'd be fine, but it's out of place wearing that uniform here in Japan. It's embarrassing! Even if I were that waitress, I would never wear that costume! Absolutely! Never!"

Aria spoke insulting words about the maid-cafe in motormouth fashion.

She probably couldn't calm herself down.

I see, this must be one of the reasons why Buteis never frequent this place.

"Welcome back, Riko-sama!" "Kyahhh! Long time no see!" "Riko-sama! The uniform that you designed was a big hit with the customers!"

What reached our ears (Aria was searching for split ends out of being compelled to at least do something while I was ordering nothing but water) were the maids' joyful voices.

It seems Riko had finally arrived.

Wait a minute... that girl is a VIP here!?

"I am sorry~~ but I'm gonna be late~~! I'm taking off~ Bruuumm!!"

Riko finally showed up before us in gothic lolita dress, striped tights and a big bell on her neck.

She is thrusting her hands on both sides, imitating an airplane. Dangling on her hand is a paperbag that contains figurines and DVD games stuck together. So that's the reason you made us wait. That makes me wanna slap you, bitch.

"Hrm... Riko will take the parfait she usually orders and strawberry au lait! For my darling, a Mariage Frères' first-flush Darjeeling tea, and you can throw a peach bun to that pink-head."

Riko decided our order by herself. She was like a fish who just gained water.

I finally understand now why she set this place up as a meeting place.

Because to Riko, Akihabara is her home ground. And by bringing us there, she has taken the advantage in this discussion.

Riko, your shrewdness knows no bounds.

"...I never thought that one day I would share a table with a descendant of Lupin. The great Sherlock Holmes in heaven must be in frenzy right now."

Aria fired her sarcastic complaints at Riko as she bolted down peach buns.

While Riko, she almost half-finished with the towering giant parfait that she ordered out of fun.

...There's cream stuck on your nose by the way.

"Riko, we didn't come here for tea party. Let me ask, you are keeping your promise, no?"

After taking a couple sips of tea, I asked Riko for confirmation.

For Aria, Riko will testify for Kanae-san.

And for me, the provision of Nii-san's information.

After that battle at the all-girls dorm's rooftop, Riko made those promises. In exchange, we will help her take back her treasure and become thieves.

"Of course, darling♪"

Riko winked as she said that. She grabbed the cup of strawberry au lait with both hands, and gulped it down.

"Who are you calling darling?"

"Ki-kun, of course! Aren't we a couple?"

"I don't even remember a millisecond when we became like that!"

"Ki-kun, you're mean! You're dumping Riko after doing all those things!? As I thought, you were only after my body..."

"First of all, I haven't done anything!"

Bam *Bam*

Aria pounded on the table as if like a judge shouting, "order in the court!"
...using a handgun instead of hammer.

"That's enough prattle. If you don't want a hole blasted in your face, then start explaining details of the mission to us."

Would you seriously draw your Colt even inside this civilian building? In contrast to my consternation, Riko, on my side...

"Don't fucking order me around, Holmes."

...suddenly switched to using vulgar language. She's piercing Aria with an intense sharp glare.

The Dark Riko who had displayed intimidation that can evince a fright even from Aria, took out a laptop from the paperbag.

Gachan

She opened it, turned on the power, and laid it on the table.

"A mansion named 'Koumeikan', located in the outskirts of Yokohama City--- It looks like an ordinary mansion at first sight, but this one is actually an ironclad fortress."

Reverting back to Normal Riko, she pointed to the display monitor. When I took a good look at it...

The monitor was displaying all kinds of information about the building. It has a total of 4 floors. From B1 to F3. It was also showing detailed maps of every floor plus the summary of the location of countless security devices.

It doesn't end there. If you try selecting the options in the task-bar, it shows you a very surprising delineated plan like tasks needed to use these infiltration and escape routes, countermeasures against prospective problem cases, estimated time of every step, and etc.

What can I say? Riko... You're amazing.

Even a professional would take half a year to contrive a plan this detailed.

"You did all this?"

"Yep."

"Since when?"

"Hmm... Around last week."

Riko, finished up the rest of parfait nonchalantly replied. In contrast, Aria opened her camellia eyes wide in astonishment.

I can't blame her for being surprised. Aria, who doesn't even know A in the ABC of strategy, ignores strategy-planning and just makes a beeline towards the problem, and solves it using brute force. That's her main method of solving cases.

"Where did you learn that strategy-making technique?"

"From Jeanne, back when we were in I-U."

Jeanne.

The one we fought before, Jeanne d'Arc 30th, also known as Durandal.

"Ki-kun, Aria. Riko's treasure... is supposed to be kept in the basement's storage, but Riko cannot infiltrate that alone. It's a tightly sealed place, literally. However, the feat would be possible for two people with outside help."

"So that's why you want Kinji and me as a set."

Aria commented, swaying her twin-tails as she leaned back on chair.

"...So, Riko. Is Vlad residing in there? And will it be fine if we arrest him if we're discovered? I think you're already aware but Vlad is also one of you who put up a false charge against my mama."

...So that's what it is.

"Ah, no. Vlad hasn't visited that place for around a decade now. The only people in that mansion right now are the manager and the housekeeper.

Although, the manager is usually out, so I couldn't get information on his or her identity..."

Riko switched the topic back so Aria merely returned a reply like, "Then, tell that to me earlier," pursing her lips in a 「^」 shape.

...Hmm. I feel a premonition of danger.

Whenever Aria gets disappointed, she has an inclination of venting her vexation towards others.

The best action that I need to take here is to muscle my way into their conversation, and then change the topic.

"I understand. So, what do we need to steal here?"

"A cross, that was bestowed to Riko by her mother."

"Y-You---!! You really have a flair for pissing people off, eh!?"

Gatan

Aria suddenly stood up and snarled, her eyebrows shooting upwards.

So it was inevitable. Still, you went ballistic faster than I expected. Are you an instant boiler or something?

"AFTER PUTTING UP A FALSE CHARGE TO MY MAMA, NOW YOU'RE ASKING ME TO RETRIEVE A KEEPSAKE OF YOUR MOTHER!?"

"H-Hey Aria, calm down. No need to react to Riko's every word."

"This is outrageous! Riko can see her mother anytime she wants! She can immediately talk to her if she just uses her cellphone! But what about me!? I can only speak to mama on the other side of lattice, and only for a small time---."

"I'm envious of you Aria."

In response to Riko, Aria...

"What makes you envious of me!?"

Aria finally aimed her gun to Riko.

However, Riko didn't draw her gun. Instead, she just sorrowfully looked down.

"Because your mama is still alive."

"...!!!"

Aria's camellia eyes slightly widened.

"Riko--- doesn't have a mother or father anymore. They passed away when Riko was 8."

"....."

"The cross was Riko's birthday present from her mother when she turned 5."

Aria sheepishly lowered her gun after hearing Riko's story. And with eyes averted, she returned back to her seat.

Well... Aria. I understand your feelings. I know you have lots of things to say, but hold it back for now.

"The cross is Riko's most precious treasure. Almost the next important thing after her life. But..."

Riko lowered her face. Or so I thought...

"That Vlad! That guy knows all this, yet, he took it away from Riko. And then hid it under a heavy security place... Curse it..."

She continued mumbling those words, in a voice filled of hatred.

That expression expresses the magnitude of her hatred to Vlad. She hates him and hates him, but is unable to do anything besides that.

A wake of tears of vexation formed in her eyes.

...Riko, you hate him that much, huh?

"N-Now, now. Stop crying. Or your make-up will be wasted and your ugly face will become uglier."

Aria, avoiding glancing at Riko, tossed a handkerchief to her.

This must be Aria's one way of showing apology after saying those things to Riko.

"A-Anyway... In short, we just need to retrieve the cross, right?"

I said that, in attempt to return the atmosphere back to normal. Riko nodded as she use Aria's handkerchief to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Don't cry Riko. You are a cheerful girl at all times despite anything. So smile."

Riko spoke that monologue as if to brainwash herself. Riko raised her head, and the maid-san entered just right on cue, gracefully providing ice water to everyone.

Thanks to that, it buffered the dismal atmosphere. Riko is back to her mischievous face as well.

"...Still... This map."

After snapping the laptop closed, Riko leaned her body forward to the table.

Map, huh. Since a third party (ie, maid-san) came in, she's probably pretending to talk about games or the likes.

"I initially thought of just normally infiltrating the place, but that approach is likely to fail. I didn't have information regarding the very inner chambers, and I only had a rough estimate of the location of the cross. It appears they are constantly changing the layout of traps as well. So then it dawned on me ---that we need to sneak inside and spend a while there to investigate the place more!"

"S-Spend a while inside?"

"What do you want us to do?"

Aria and I inquired. Riko, raising both hands upward, like doing a 'Hurray' gesture, declared...

"Aria and Ki-Kun! Your first mission is to disguise as maid-chan and butler-kun!"

...What?

Aria and I incredulously stared at each other.

...Maid-chan...

...Butler-kun...

...is that what she said...?

The two of us are twitching our face in harmony.

Aria, who had been criticizing the maid uniform earlier, pointed her slender finger, saying...

"L-Like this?"

...to the smiling maid-san beside us, who was sloping her head.

3rd Ammo: Wolf and Reki

Infiltration.

It is one method of investigation where Buteis disguise themselves and sneak in as a spy to collect information regarding their target ---and use force to apprehend them in the scene if the situation deems it wise to do so. The target associations varies from violent gangs, enterprises, to night clubs, etc.

In other words, it is a deceive-and-strike method.

It had been illegal in Japan for quite a long time before it became legalized recently to counter the influx of heinous crimes.

In Butei High, this method is mainly used by the CVR girls, but other departments like Inquesta, Lezzad, and Assault sometimes use it too. I actually had an experience of infiltrating a high school for rich guys and girls. A famous story in Butei High, was that Shiranui had actually infiltrated a host club before.

So, starting next week...

Aria and I will be infiltrating into an old mansion in Yokohama named Koumeikan, disguising ourselves as a 'Butler' and a 'Maid'.

Not to do an investigation, but to steal.

I thought to myself: Hey Kinji, even though this is a requirement to obtain information regarding Nii-san, isn't this considered a blatant abuse of technology?

As of far, the authorized personnel in Koumeikan are the master of the mansion, Vlad, the unknown manager, and the two hired housekeepers.

It seems the housekeepers are currently taking their vacations. At the same time of the manager's return, they are hiring two part-timers to take the housekeepers' place.

That's where Riko pretended to be an employee of a work dispatcher company. She contacted Koumeikan, and sent a message of job request.

Riko's efficient action never fails to impress me. Well, what she's doing is no different from a robbery though.

But before everything else...

Why the heck am I infiltrating this place?

"Yeah~" "Isn't it?" "That stinks, right." "Come to think of it, why do only us girls have to retake a physical examination?" "I don't know~ But all I can say is it's a drag~"

The voice of the girls can be heard beyond the slit on the iron plate.

This is the 7th infirmary room, located on the 1st floor of the Ambulance building.

Riko made a training course for Aria and I separately in order to prepare for the infiltration. My first lesson according to Riko was to come to this room after school. Riko sent me the order via mail.

So while complaining, I reluctantly followed the order, and when I arrived, the infirmary room was desolated... I was at loss for a while until a few girls coming from the hallway entered the infirmary as they chatted with each other. I applied the shadow gait^[16] that I learned from Assault, and hid myself from their sight.

Then suddenly, the girls started taking off their uniforms one after another.

...Riko had me.

The moment I noticed that fact, everything was too late. The one and only available escape route I had... was to hide myself inside this huge locker, which explains my current situation. Somehow, confined spaces are becoming my best friend recently since I also have a bulletproof drawer in my home, which always saves my hide from Aria and Shirayuki.

"...And, what are you doing here, Muto?"

"You're one to ask?"

For some reason, there's already a first-comer inside the locker, Gouki Muto.

He's the Logi's ace, and an unwanted but inseparable friend ever since enrollment.

However, this big guy is nothing but a hindrance to me right now.

"Aren't you also here to peep at the girl's physical re-examination?"

"It's probably not convincing to say this under this situation, but this is the truth so I'll say it anyway--- NO."

"Still Kinji, you amaze me..."

"What do you mean?"

"That you singled out this place. Out of all infirmaries in Butei High, this is the easiest place to procure an escape route; in other words, a perfect place for peeping. After all, it is located in the first floor. There are trees and brushes outside the window that serve as a countermeasure against peeking, but I used that to my advantage instead. I parked a camouflaged-framed motorcycle there. In case that we've been spotted, we can use that to ride our asses out of here."

This guy turns into a genius Butei when things come to this.

"Let's see today's roster... Ohhhhhh!? It's a big catch! There's Aya Hiraga, Riko Mine, and Fuu of Lezzad. Ah, Reki is also there. Hmm... I don't see Hotogi-san. Oh? Your Aria is here as well, Kinji."

What do you mean 'My Aria'?

"Oi Kinji, why are you lowering your head? Look properly through the slit! What did you come here for?"

"I told you, I didn't come here to peep!"

As I whispered my appeal of innocence to Muto, my cellphone vibrated. It seems I made a wise judgement on putting it in silent mode.

I had a bad feeling. When I took a look, the sender of the mail... was Riko.

Uuwah. What's this mail littered with emoticons? It's annoying.

"Ki-kun. How's the locker suiting you? I took the liberty of clearing out its contents yesterday. Tell me if you find anyone besides Rikorin that's making you hysteric. I'll steal that girl's item that Ki-kun wants."

Decoding a gal's text message took a lot of effort. After decoding it, that turned out to be Riko's message.

T-That girl...

Come to think of it, Riko was saying something about training me to voluntarily trigger my Hysteria Mode for the actual mission. So this is part of it, huh.

Hmm?

A second mail came.

"Oh. I need to check if Ki-kun is properly looking! Here's a question: What color of underwear is Riko wearing? Send the answer within 10 seconds. If you fail to give the correct answer, Riko will open the locker as a penalty!"

H-Hey, hey... This is bad!

I have thought of just simply asking Muto to give me the answer but it won't make it in time. Including that query, and the time it takes to input the answer, it will be past the time limit before I could even send it. Plus, I've wasted 5 seconds already from reading the mail.

As much as possible, I don't want to take my chance of risking triggering hysteria by scrutinizing girl's underwear.

However, it'll be a mishap if Riko causes a commotion. Why? Because present in this room, is our Quadra Demon Butei--- Aria-sama!

"O-Out of the way, Muto!"

Brushing aside the head of the drooling idiot, I pressed my face against the locker door's slit.

In my view---

...are girls, girls, and girls.

In the process of finding Riko, looking at the other girl's half-naked bodies were unavoidable.

The one who modified my Beretta, Hiraga-san of Amdo department. Her image was an innocent girl from outside appearance... I never expected that even her underwear is that of innocent girl's. What's with that kiddy underwear with a bear printed on the back?

But that's actually perfect. With that childish body, there's no danger of turning me into Hysteria.

Fuuma, 1st year Lezzad. As a girl, why are you wearing a **fundoshi**? I heard she was a grand-daughter of a ninja but that character is too innovative! This girl is also safe. Rather than a fan-service, it's more like a gag.

Standing upright like a human body model is Reki of Snipe department. She's wearing a set of bra and panties that looked like the type being sold in **JUSCO** for 980 yen. An unadorned plain cotton silk. Needless to say, this one is also safe.

3 seconds left.

There are other girls as well but angle-wise, or concealed by other girls, I couldn't see them.

That's a relief. Today is my day. It sure is. This might be rude, but thanks to those girls with poor sex appeal acting as a cover for other girls, I managed to give Hysteria Mode a slip.

Deliberately putting her elbows on the weighing scale, Riko appealed her location to me. The color of her underwear...

...is Honey Gold.

I swiftly fiddled the answer on the cellphone that I already left in the enter-message screen, and sent it.

Damn you, Riko. Wearing high-class underwear for a Chibi.

The cellphone that Riko is spinning with a finger through a cellphone strap, its screen flickered. She gave the cell's screen a cursory look, probably reading my mail, and gestured an OK sign and a wink facing the locker.

I heaved a deep sigh of relief. I checked myself. Sexual arousal level... is ok. It's on the verge of passing the limit, but I somehow made it.

Haha, it's my victory this time Riko!

That's right. I ain't a kid that will become aroused at every girl's underwear.

Throb

I could just shut my eyes, but I was distracted at Riko's figure--- when she grabbed a girl and pulled it before the locker. My heart jumped wildly from seeing that girl's figure.

Aria.

Yes. To Aria's figure who's wearing a playing-card patterned underwear.
And before I knew it, I was in Hysteria Mode.

Y...You can't be joking?

I... was consciously trying hard to control it.

This... is the first time I encountered this case...

"Okay, Aria. Let's measure your three sizes before Sensei comes in!"

With a finger movement like that of a dirty old man, Riko stretched out the measuring tape. Aria took one step back, her face slightly flushed.

"...W-Why are you measuring my three sizes? That's really perverted."

"So I can make you a maid uniform and apron, of course! For that, I need to know your measurements first. Didn't you know? Riko is actually famous in Lolita dress industry? Okay, here we go! First, let's find out Aria's bust size!"

"Bust size!?"

Aria covered her flat-as-a-washboard chest with both arms, glaring at Riko's D-cup breasts.

"I-Is that your sarcasm for me!? Just because m-my, my... my... my development is a bit, fairly, slightly, and somewhat slower than others, you...!"

"What are you talking about Aria? Chippai^[17] has its popularity too, you know?"

"...What are you saying?"

"There are plenty of guys in this world that love small-chested girls. And the number isn't something that can be ignored."

"Hmph. Who would believe... such a lie. Even if it is true, I don't have any interest in guys, so it's irrelevant."

"Hnnmm? I see, this topic is over then. Lemme measure you now."

"So... A number that can't be ignored, you say. Particularly how much? How's the credibility of your sources? I'll let you measure me or whatever you want. In exchange, let me hear more information regarding that matter. What year was that statistics taken? What's the standard deviation? How was the sampling?"

Riko measured Aria's bust from behind.

Aria... you're oddly over-curious about that. Do you have a guy that you like or something?

Well, but that's something outside my business.

I moved away my eyes from the slit... After throwing a glance with a subtext of 'Sorry about that' to the sulking Muto, I leaned my back to the internal wall of the locker.

In the end, I turned into Hysteria Mode but...

I deem this mode a problem only when I am with girls. Luckily, Muto is a guy, so there's nothing to worry about.

In short, I just need to wait here until I revert back to normal.

(However...)

Leaving myself aside...

I am a bit curious about the girls earlier.

Hiraga-san's ancestor is **Hiraga Gennai**, a famous inventor back in Edo period. My 1-year junior, Fuuma, who people normally call Fuu, is a descendant of a high-class ninja family. Reki, I am not sure. And no need to mention about Aria and Riko... From a glance, this room has a number of girls descended from famous figures.

It's odd that those girls are all coincidentally taking this physical re-examination. Is there a reason behind it?

As I contemplated those things---

Gacha

The girls let out a high-pitched scream from the sound of door opening.

"...Did someone come in?"

I asked Muto in a whisper.

"Yeah. Sayonaki."

Muto, still peeking from the slit, answered with an annoyed tone.

"That guy. There is a rumor around him. He pretends to be a good guy in the surface... but secretly assaults girls. Moreover, someone saw a girl walking out with unsteady steps from Sayonaki's research lab."

That's--- something that I can't ignore.

It might extend the duration of Hysteria Mode, but let's keep watch for a bit.

Sticking our face together in front of the the slit, trying to have a good look of the situation outside the locker, Sayonaki, clad in white cloth, entered the room. He said...

"...T-There is no need to take off clothes! I just need to draw your blood anyway. Didn't you read the mail? It's written in there. Okay, put all your clothes back on!"

Sayonaki after saying that, sat in a round chair, forming a wry smile.

And then looked beyond the window...

"--Fii Bucuros... Scoala buna. Nu este interesant de sange..."

...He's mumbling something.

Fii... Bukkorosu?^[18] Ah no, I reckon it's not Japanese. I wonder in what language it is?

On one hand... the girls, although still bewildered, put back their clothes on respectively. This group misunderstanding, even the Butei girls who have the same level of coyness as primitive men, would feel embarrassment.

...But.

Only one girl remained different.

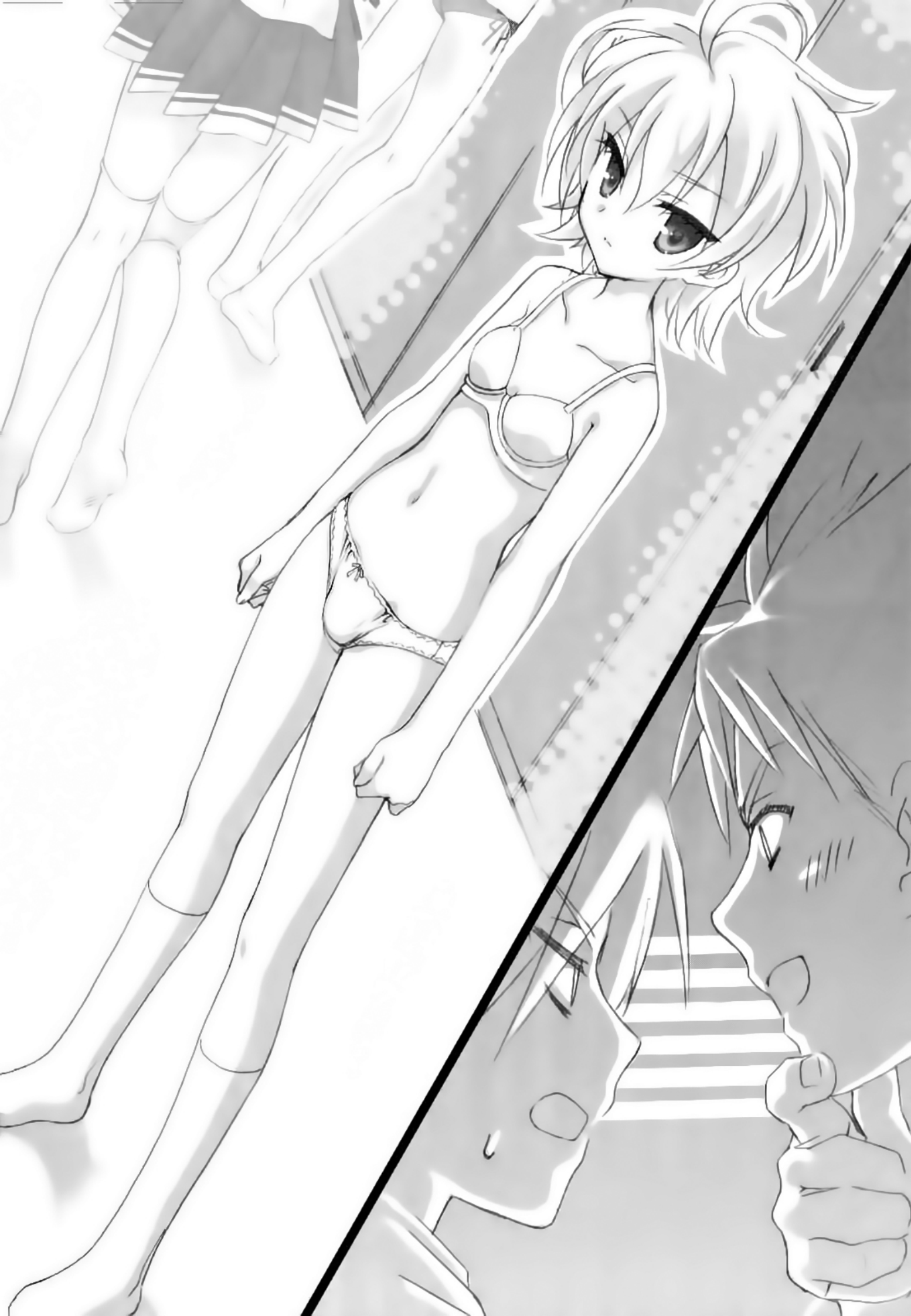
It's Reki.

Not even a pattern nor a line design on it, she's still in her swimsuit-like white underwear...

Her camera-like eyes are fixed beyond the window.

Did she find out about Muto's motorcycle?

"....."



Reki stayed still... continuing on staring outside the window.

.....

...Still, her underwear is the epitome of simpleness.

Her hairstyle is cut fastidiously short. Reki, who was called 'Robot Reki' by other people, seemed to be completely indifferent on things like fashion.

Like a portion of guys claim, Reki is a bishoujo if you take a better a look at her... but she's a taciturn, impassive, and apathetic. She's also indifferent to her physical looks. It's a parade of negative qualities. And to add more, she must be the type that is inconspicuous.

That motionless Reki.

...Moved.

Or so I thought...

She kicked the linoleum, and dashed...

Towards us---!

"E-Ehhhhh!?"

As I heard Muto inadvertently let out a panic voice, Reki...

...swiftly opened the door of the locker Muto and I were hiding in!

"!?"

And then she reached out her both hands and grabbed both Muto's and my neckties... and pulled us, in action that seemed like she was gonna slam us both to the ground.

"W-Wait! I apologize! I'm sor--!"

Muto's shout, faster than the girls could let out their scream--- was interrupted.

Gashaaaaa

By a sharp, piercing sound of shattering glass.

"!?"

Bam!

A force assaulted the locker.

The locker got distorted, and got blown away as if it was made in paper.

Thanks to Reki's pull, I was safe. However, Muto's big stature hampered Reki in pulling him on time. That delay, cost him his life.

"Muto!"

Rolling my body on Reki's side, I stared at the blown locker together with Muto.

"!!!"

Muto, although evincing a painful face, was still breathing. Well, that's a Butei for you.

He drew his gun from his holster.

Colt Manufacturing Company's long seller gun, Colt Python.

Its accuracy is bad, and it uses a revolver-type magazine. It was deemed an unsuitable gun for Butei but--- it can fire a .357 magnum bullet. Its firepower is outstanding. And with a body-build like Muto it makes firing a handgun with a power of a cannon feasible.

"...Are you... kidding me...?"

However, mumbling was all Muto could do. He didn't fire his gun.

Because he was captivated by the figure on top of him and the upended locker.

I had the same reaction as Muto, and everyone else in the room.

The figure above the locker, is actually a huge, silver-furred---

---Wolf.

Yes, a Wolf.

Not to imitate Muto's remark, but I'll also say this: Are you kidding me?

However, the fact of it being here indicates that it's not a joke. It's not a dog, but a genuine wolf. Though I am not perfectly knowledgeable about

animals, I had studied about wild beasts back in Assault so I am certain that this one is the real deal.

The oppressive killing intent that it emits, its robust body that somewhat alludes of elegance, and its huge body that could weigh around 100 kilograms. No doubt. This is the real Caucasus Silver Wolf, which people had thought to be extinct already.

But... why is it in this place!?

(Reki...)

She pulled us out of the locker to save us from getting squashed. That means, she already realized long ago that we were peeping in there. She just didn't do or say anything.

And then she found out that the wolf was gonna attack the locker, and attempted to save us.

This intuition and the keen ability in sensing danger is what you expect from a S-Rank Butei.

"...Everyone! Get out of here, quick!!"

I shouted at the girls but Muto...

Baam!!

Fired a warning shot towards the ceiling.

Normally, animals fear loud noises. However, the gunfire blast of the .357 magnum bullet did nothing to faze the wolf.

And then it leapt towards the defenseless, half-naked girls.

"---Muto! Don't use your gun! The girls aren't wearing safety vests right now. Ricochets might hit them!"

Shouting that with Hysteria Mode still active, I charged towards the wolf.

Grabbing its sharp-pointed fur, I...

Gashan!

...slammed its body that's probably bigger than a normal person into the medicine cabinet.

Roar

The wolf, after letting out a howl for the first time, bared its sharp claws and attempted to tear my chest...

As if it used that strike to assist in rebounding its body, it jumped back.

"Kuh...!"

What power...

Although I attenuated the power by countering it with a palm heel strike, if it was a second late, having a safety vest^[19] or not wouldn't matter as it would probably tear through it together with my flesh, bones and organs.

Maybe a repugnant medicine got caught on its face back when it clashed into the medicine cabinet, as the wolf is repeatedly shaking its head left and right. And then...

"...Ah!"

It tackled Sayonaki, who was standing in the other side.

Sayonaki tumbled to the floor together with the height rod. The wolf escaped through the window that it destroyed.

It was a blunder. I made a mistake in prioritizing who to protect.

Sayonaki-sensei, even though he's a Butei instructor, is a part-time instructor. He never took battle training before, and therefore, he is no different from a civilian.

He is comparably weaker than Butei girls, even if both are weaponless.

However, my Hysteria Mode didn't allow me to do that. It always put girls above all else.

Because of that, sensei had suffered...!

"After it, Kinji! Leave sensei's treatment to us!"

Hearing Aria's order from behind, I nodded as I picked myself up.

Not just Sayonaki-sensei. In this academy island, there are a huge number of civilians that work in facilities for student services.

If I leave that beast on the loose--- things will be serious.

"Kinji! Use this! It's parked beyond those trees!"

I caught the key that Muto threw as I ran outside through the broken window.

Muto. How far were you planning to escape if you were discovered?

Outside the infirmary room, and secretly parked in the underbrush is a---

BMW K1200R.

This naked bike. Isn't this the one that has the world's most powerful engine installed on it!?

W-Well... I guess you will need something like this if you want to escape the likes of Aria or Riko.

I inserted the key into the ignition and twisted it to turn on the power... Broom! Using the kick starter (which Muto had probably installed as an add-on) as a foothold, I vaulted and sat astride on the motorcycle and revved the engine.

Carrying her Dragunov sniper rifle on back, Reki, still in underwear suit, took the back seat of the motorcycle.

"---Reki!? Why are you here!? Go back and wear your safety vest!"

"You can't defeat it by yourself."

Reki is right... That wolf's fleet movement is outside the scope of what my sight can follow.

And in process of search and tracking, we might need the scope attached to Reki's Dragunov.

Moreover, I cannot forcefully reject a girl's resolution. That is, the Hysteria Mode me.

"Hang on to me tightly."

Bruuummm.

Switching to low gear, I accelerated the motorcycle.

This 1200cc series 4-cylinder engine, also produced a sound similar to a wolf's baying.

I learned how to use an autobike for chasing missions back in Assault. Specially when the chase is done within the city, the bike's acceleration and braking power are the conducting factors for the outcome of the chase.

In that matter, this K1200R is perfect for that job. It can reach 100 kph (around 60 mph) in 2.8 seconds from a standing start, and the high caliber front suspension buffers the impact of sudden braking like magic.

And we also have Reki for navigation.

"South region of the artificial island, where the construction site is."

Not showing any sign of embarrassment, Reki, riding on my back clad in her underwear, informed me of the possible location of the wolf.

"Did you see it?"

"I saw footprints of it inside the construction site."

I-It's a miracle that you saw that with your naked eyes. As what you expect from the 120/20 vision Reki^[20].

Feeling my amazement at Reki, we entered the construction site.

As what Reki had said, a number of sandbags were smitten and its contents were dispersed on the floor. There are footprints imprinted in the sand.

Reki grabbed the sniper rifle from the back and held it in front of her chest.

Seeing that, I felt a bit worried.

"Did you bring a tranquilizer bullet with you?"

"Negative."

"...I see."

Beast extermination quests are one of the banes of Butei.

Just like today, if you didn't bring the right gear with you, in the worst case scenario, you will have no choice but to shoot down the life of an innocent animal.

"I'll take it down using a normal bullet. Please chase after it."

You haven't changed at all--- Reki.

Back in my Assault days, there were a number of times that I had teamed up with Reki doing quests, but this girl never lifted an eyebrow from start to finish no matter what kind of job and measure we took. She impassively accomplished her mission without fail.

I shifted the engine to low gear. As I followed the footprints...

"!?"

Opposite of the footprints' direction, reflected the wolf's figure through the back mirror!

---It was a trap!

This wolf. It deliberately left a set of footprints, and backtracked by carefully stepping on its own footprints in order to avoid leaving two sets of footprints, thus, faking its destination. On top of that, it even lurked its body in the shadows, ready to ambush us!!

"That's really smart!"

I instantly slewed the bike, using its frame as a shield to protect the defenseless Reki.

Bump!

The wolf charged the bike... and for a moment each kept pushing each other in deadlock.

It was probably trained to withdraw if the ambush strike didn't succeed in taking down the enemy, as the wolf leapt back. It jumped over a rift around 10 meters wide, a rift that leads to the sea, made during the construction.

Hmph. I see. It must be thinking that we won't be able to cross that rift.

I fired two shots with my Beretta in my left hand and toppled one end of a construction building's scaffold. Its shape became like a slide that you can find in parks.

I accelerated the bike, intending to use that slide as a ramp--- it leapt over the rift!!

And landed over the other side, slightly drifting while leaving tire prints on the ground.

"---I am a single bullet---"

Reki muttered on my back. Not even realizing since when, she's standing on the back seat.

The heck!? Are you a goddess of balancing!?

The muzzle of the Dragunov is pointed diagonally upward. At the end of its path, is a construction building.

The construction building is layered with scaffolding. The wolf used those as a stepping stone, to proceed upwards. It's completely within Reki's shooting range.

"It has no heart. Therefore, it does not think."

Aah, just like you.

"It just flies straight towards its target."

Forgive us, wolf.

Tang

The brass bullet shell danced in the wind...

And the relentless bullet fired from the muzzle---

Grazed the wolf's back, missing its target.

---What!?

This is the first time I've seen Reki miss her target!

We're talking about a genius girl here that can even shoot down a hardcover book that is 2 kilometers away.

"...I'm a bit glad."

"What for?"

"That you missed. As I thought Reki, you're still a human."

"??? I've been a human from the start."

"You have quite a cute side to you. Did you think badly on shooting down the wolf?"

My Hysteria Mode said that with a wry smile.

Reki, still expressionless, fixed the holding of her Dragunov to her shoulder.

It seems she doesn't intend on unleashing a second shot.

Looking upward, the wolf did its last leap, and fled to the rooftop.

But the other side of that area is the sea. There is no place to run.

I parked the bike and dismounted. Reki followed suit, and stood by my side.

And then replied with her usual toneless voice.

"I didn't miss."

I'll finish this Reki, so you stay here. ---Well, that's what I told Reki but she didn't listen and followed me to the rooftop.

The roof hasn't had an installation of fence yet. With the Tokyo's skyscrapers as the background, as if it floats above the sea...

The silver wolf is standing there gallantly.

This scenery makes one feel it's out of place, yet somehow beautiful. Or something magical that can be sensed from it.

After a few seconds of glare, the wolf started manifesting a trembling movement.

".....?"

What's happening?

With a dull sound, the wolf fell over.

If you take a closer look, on its back, starting from the neck going downwards, is a vertical abrasion mark.

"That previous bullet I fired grazed the part above the area between the spinal cord and thoracic spine, pressuring it instantly."

Reki is---

Directing those words not to me, but to the wolf.

"Right now, your spinal nerve is paralyzed. You cannot move anything below your neck. However--- it only lasts for around 5 minutes. After that duration, you'll be free from the immobility, and you will be able to move normally."

...I-Is that so.

I thought Reki missed that previous shot...

But Reki wasn't aiming for the wolf, she actually had an entirely different target, and an outrageous one at that. It was a successful hit. No, maybe it's more proper to call it a miracle shot instead.

This girl is really a prodigy.

The no. 1 girl that you would not want to choose as an enemy more than Aria.

"You can choose to flee if you want. However--- even if you run anywhere within a 2 kilometer radius, my arrow will pierce you."

The wolf stared at Reki as if it understood her words.

1 minute. 2 minutes has passed. This is bad. My Hysteria Mode is weakening.

I drew my Beretta, preparing for the worst, as I prayed and relied on it at the same time.

"---Submit your loyalty to me. From now on, I will be your master."

As if to answer those words, the wolf, panting heavily, scratching the air as if struggling, laboriously picked itself up.

It seemed the effect of the paralysis is weakening.

The injured wolf walked unsteadily...

It went past me who's swallowing my breath...

Moved near Reki...

And nuzzled her leg.

It looked like a dog now, showing its loyalty to its master.

This was... another unbelievable feat.

The assailant beast that was about to kill us a while ago, turned into a loyal pet in a matter of minutes.

As I felt impressed at Reki, I placed the gun back to the holster, producing a sigh of relief.

"...So, what are you planning to do with that wolf?"

"Treat its wound. It's loyal to me now."

"And after that?"

"Adopt as a pet."

"P-Pet?"

"That's my purpose for chasing after it."

"I-Is that so? But I heard the girl's dorms don't allow pets? Well, not that the dorm residents absolutely follow that rule, but that one will attract a lot of attention."

"I'll train it to become a Butei dog then."

H-Hey, hey.

Butei dog is the Butei version of military or police dog. In Butei School, Repier and Inquesta use it to detect the culprit's trace. I don't see any use of it in Snipe department.

Or I think we're mistaking the point of the problem here.

"...If you rationally think about it, that's not a dog but a wolf."

"It's the same thing."

"I'm not sure about that."

"Hand."

The wolf raised one paw to Reki.

...Hey, you're too quick in changing your character!

Well, I guess you don't wish to die. Because Aria usually does that same thing to me, I felt a sudden sense of closeness towards the wolf.

"...Nevermind. I'll respect your decision. I'll leave the wolf to you then. Also..."

"?"

"...Can you put on some clothes now?"

Averting my gaze from Reki, who's still in her underwear...

I recalled from the back of my mind, Shirayuki's divination to me.

'Kin-chan will encounter a wolf, a demon, and a ghost', was it?

The following day after school.

I entrusted the wolf issue together with the investigations to Reki.

After that incident, I got chased around by a barbarous twin tail for committing a crime of peeping. Not giving me any time to recover the 10+ bruises that I suffered around my body, Riko issued an order to come to her room for another upcoming mission training.

According to Riko, turning me into a butler is a relatively simple task. However, Aria here is our main problem.

I guess that's understandable.

Aria is an expert in fighting, an exactly opposite work of serving people. It's the same ridiculous analogy of asking an assassin to do a babysitting job.

"Riko!! Stop touching me in weird places!"

"Don't mind. Don't mind. Ohh!! Aria, you smell good!" *sniff* *sniff*

"H-Hentai!! Hentai number 2 is here!"

"That's right, Aria. And if Hentai Riko unleashed her full strength, Aria would already be naked with an apron!"

From beyond the room, I can hear Aria and Riko's chaotic conversation.

A few minutes ago, Riko had declared, "Everything starts with appearance!", and brought a maid suit with her. A noble like Aria seemed very reluctant in wearing that dress. She had clutched it with both hands, red-faced and petrified.

So then for starters, Riko had compromised by ordering Aria to just wear an apron above the school uniform. But this Riko-designed apron seemed impossible for Aria as well. She snarled, "There's no way I can wear this childish frilly dress!", stubbornly recalcitrant in wearing it. Finally, Riko snapped and peremptorily dressed Aria in the apron. Thus explaining the above conversation.

As for me, during that period, I was ordered to turn my back.

I'm worried about our future mission...

Well, putting that aside.

Aria mentioned 'Hentai number 2' a while ago... Eh? That means, not only as a slave but I'm also 1st for being a hentai!?

"Ohhh!!? It's done! Ki-kun, Look! It's a school apron uniform! Aria, you're cute! Moe!!"

"I get it, Riko, so can you calm down for a bit? You're disturbing the neighbors."

"Look at Aria, Ki-Kun! Doesn't it make you want to gaze at her until it opens a hole in her body!?"

If I do that, Aria will punch a hole through my body instead... with a bullet.

I derisively complained inside my mind but, since our contractor this time is Riko, I can't possibly disobey her order.

"Noooooooo!!!"

Aria, who was pulled by Riko from the blind spot of the closet...

She's...

Cute. It's my honest impression.

The white apron dress that is donned on top of the sailor uniform has a huge heart-shaped design in the chest part. Even the cloth that's draping along the waist also has a pocket that's shaped like a heart.

It's a girly design that you would expect from Riko.

"Okay, Aria! Let's start your training. First, let's practice inquiring your master for service."

"...What are you talking about...?"

Knitting her brows, the Apron Aria asked Riko. She's clearly getting swallowed in Riko's pace.

"Say this with a full smile: 'Master, how can I serve you today?' Of course, we'll have Ki-kun as the master!"

"EH!?", blurted Aria.

I also did an "EH!?" inside my mind.

So I was called here for that reason?

This situation seems like we're doing 'house play' here.

Aria slowly turned her head in my direction like a rusted robot.

She's producing a big chunk of sweat in the forehead, and her face is as red as a conflagration. She's even gritting her teeth in vexation.

"C'mon Aria, after Riko! 'Master, how can I serve you today?', with a smile."

"M-Mas... *cough* *cough*"

Aria, being ordered by the high-tension Riko, even worse than stuttering, she coughed in the middle of the speech.

This is terrible. Aria could only say one syllable. This is beyond the level of having no flair for a maid!

"...I-I can't do this! This is too sudden! At least give me some time for mental preparation...!"

"Go! Go! Aria! You can do it! Fight, fight! Never give up!!"

Riko... Right now, your face is brimming with happiness. Are you really sure this is part of Aria's training?

Aren't you just doing this for your own enjoyment?

"...M-Mas..."

Forced to do the entirely opposite position of what Aria usually does to me, she looked like a person being stricken with a strange disease. Her face color switched randomly to red, to blue, and to white.

"...M-Ma-Mas...ter..."

Aria bared her teeth, forcing a smile.

"Ahaae", coming from Aria's forced laugh exhausted a smoke or something. T-That's scary. I tell you, it's impossible for you!

"...H-How...can I... serve..."

"Ki-kun, give Aria an order!"

Riko clapped her hands towards me.

Uhh... even if you ask me that suddenly.

"Let's see... Umm, Aria, how about doing laundry?"

I offhandedly ordered as I edged myself away from Aria.

"But don't use your chest to wash them."

Bang *Bang* *Bang*

Zushaa!

Let's clarify the above three lines.

Riko's dialogue, gunfire noises of Aria pumping her gun at me, and myself rolling to the floor.

Is everything gonna turn out alright for us? I sense big trouble in the future.

In preparation for our infiltration mission, not only Aria does have to be trained, but I also have my own training as a butler. Riko gave me reference materials and I used the time after school to self-study them. One day, when I was leaving the Inquesta building around 5PM...

It's raining.

Umbrella...

I didn't bring one with me today.

It's about time you learn from your past mistake Kinji.

The rain is mild to begin with, so I just thought of rushing straight to the bus station. However, it seemed that I underestimated 2-A Kinji Tohyama's second name: 'misfortune'. Just like a comical situation in manga, I was passing near the Fine Arts building when it rained heavily. I had no choice but to take a temporary shelter from the rain under the eaves.

My lips were forming a 「^」 shape as I stared at rain droplets falling from the edge of the eaves, when I noticed that... there was diamond dust mingled with the rain... Could it be my imagination?

"....."

Standing there blankly, staring at the air... when suddenly, I recognized a sound of piano coming from the music room behind.

...The one playing the piano is quite good.

What's the name of this song?

I'm sure I've heard it before during music class... that's right! Oratorio dramatique, was it? But this one was arranged for piano.

The title is..... 'Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher'.

...

.....I am...

.....having a very bad feeling.

I softly turn around...

"---Geh...!"

I unconsciously moved back after seeing the scene beyond the music room.

She probably heard my sudden exclamation, as she lifted her head from the piano.

Inside the music room, wearing Butei's sailor uniform is---

(J-Jeanne!?)

Last month, during the season of Adseard^[21], when Shirayuki had been kidnapped, we had crossed sword and gunfire with Jeanne d'Arc 30th aka Durandal down at the junction (basement warehouse).

Jeanne caught my gaze. Slightly widening those clear blue eyes...

She looked towards the threshold of the music room.

---Jeanne's 'Come over here' sign, it seemed.

Releasing the safety catch of my Beretta, I entered the music room. I didn't mistake it, Jeanne d'Arc is certainly in there.

One arm on her waist, Jeanne was in her default cool countenance.

Arising from lateral sides of her head are two long, silver braids that meet on the top of her head, and then loosely extend downward behind her back.

"...Plea Bargain?"

I said those words and clucked my tongue. Jeanne replied with a snort.

"Correct."

Her lips coated with rose-pink lipstick formed a smile as if to ridicule me.

"Even so, I am no different from being a captive. One of the conditions of Plea Bargain forces me to stay here as a Butei student. That's why

Tohyama, even if you remove the safety mechanism of your gun, I have no intention of fighting you. Right now, I am just a 2nd year international student from Paris enrolled in Informa department."

---So that's your setting here, huh.

Wait, we're the same age!?

I thought she was older than me because she exudes an adult aura.

"That explains why you're wearing that uniform, despite it not suiting you at all."

To be honest, it looks nice on her. But I chose to tell lies instead out of bad mood.

"...This is embarrassing for me, you know?"

Jeanne turned towards the window's direction. She knitted her eyebrows at her own appearance reflected through the glass.

She has more height than an average girl. Her navel flashed in my eye every time she straightened her back.

"First of all, what's with this uniform? Even if hiding the guns on their thighs were the custom since Dellinger's era... unmarried girls shouldn't be openly revealing their legs like this!"

Yeah, right. Then why are you properly wearing that uniform in front of me?

Furthermore, if you claim that, what will happen to that armor you wear that shows off your waist?

"You don't wear a uniform in I-U?"

When I asked that probe-insinuating question, Jeanne, ardently surveying her reflection in the window, leered back at me.

"Do you want to know about I-U?"

"Yeah. Aria and Riko won't tell me anything."

"Well... since merely knowing about it may put your life in jeopardy. It's a top national secret after all. But for me, I would rather tell you everything and thrust you into the depths of hell as a retribution for putting me into this

situation. Although, as much as I want to do that, I cannot tell you everything."

"Did someone in I-U warn you not to do that?"

"No. The problem is I-U doesn't prohibit personal fights. Depending on what I say, I may be targeted by them. That's why... I can only tell you the safe details."

"Considering your strength, I don't think there would be a problem even if you're targeted."

I said that sarcastically...

"...I doubt that."

The proud descendant of Jeanne d'Arc, shook her head pessimistically... and said the words which I wouldn't want to hear if possible.

"I am the weakest in I-U."

What... did you say?

You're telling me...

This diamond-dust witch Jeanne aka Durandal, whom we barely managed to defeat with the combined forces of Aria, Shirayuki and myself...

...is the weakest in I-U?

Dear God... So Aria was picking a fight with that kind of organization all along?

---wait, I am included in that as well.

Inside the music room, I relapsed myself in front of the table.

Jeanne sat gracefully in a chair. Her back is bent straight upwards. Her legs gently slope down, it's the sitting-style of a rich girl. Our distance is closer compared a while ago, so I can detect a faint aroma emanating from her. Maybe perfume or something? In this dismal season, the refreshing smell coming from Jeanne isn't actually bad, I thought.

"Back to your previous question--- I don't wear a uniform in I-U. Just like in this school, there's no uniform for teachers."

That's way back before.

What a serious girl. Honestly, I don't care at all about uniform and stuff.

"...You were a teacher?"

Riko mentioned before that she was 'expelled' from I-U.

Then that means, their system is similar to that of school...?

"In I-U, everyone is a teacher, and at the same time, a student as well. I-U is a place where prodigies congregate, and share their skills with one another, extending their limits further, until one day, they surpass the natural order."

So, it's that kind of place. No wonder I-U wanted to abduct Shirayuki. They were after her powers.

"What are your goals?"

"As an organization, none. Everyone is free to have their own goal."

Gulp

I swallowed saliva as I vaguely make out I-U's creepy nature.

Geniuses sharing their abilities with one another, surpassing their limits.

That concept itself is amazing. It's one outstanding thing.

But the problem here is--- looking at Riko and Jeanne's *modi operandi*, they are just a bunch of criminals that have no intention of abiding with laws.

"You taught Riko strategy-making techniques, while Riko taught you how to mimic people's voices. That's one example of sharing skills, right?"

"That's right."

"I see. So the two criminals get along with each other, huh."

"We get along well. I like Riko, she's a diligent person."

"Diligent? That Riko?"

"Of all I-U members, the most ambitious and assiduous in learning... is Riko Mine Lupin the 4th. Riko wants to become stronger than anyone else. Her devoted attitude is unflagging, to the point that watching it is heartrending."

I can't help but feel surprised upon hearing Jeanne's words.

Riko... So she was the type that acts dumb on the surface, but works hard in the shadows.

Our discussion was interrupted by a middle-school girl knocking at the door. She said they will be using the music room for their club activities. We both left the music room.

The rain debilitated itself into a drizzle. Together with Jeanne, who didn't bring an umbrella as well, we fled towards the nearby family restaurant, 'Roxi'.

Putting aside her chivalrous personality, Jeanne looks like a beauty that appears in western fantasy movies. Her mere presence is eye-catching.

Anyway, I, who dislikes attention, swiftly ordered two drinks and pulled Jeanne towards the serving machine.

I proffered a cup to Jeanne. She knitted her brow upon receiving it. She stared at the machine.

"What kind of machine is this?"

What? You don't know?

"You press it like this, and drinks will pour out. There are a total of 10 drinks to choose from. There's a number that comes with the picture. See it?"

I pushed the button with 9 on it. It's melon soda.

"What should I press?"

"Whatever you like. It's bottomless."

"Bottomless? What do you mean?"

"It means, you're free to drink how much you like."

"No matter how much?"

"Yup."

"Really? What if... I drink 100 liters?"

"...Feel free. That's still okay."

"There's no way I can drink that much. Are you an idiot?"

"You're the one who started that!"

I almost trip myself from how Jeanne seriously asked me that dumb question.

Geez. Aria is like that, Jeanne is like this. Why couldn't you transfer students learn the common sense in Japan before transferring here?

I frowned as I took a sip of the melon soda.

This pungent melon flavor makes me want to crave these kinds of drinks occasionally.

"By the way Jeanne, your Japanese is good."

"That's because Japanese and German are our standard languages in I-U."

Standard language...? What is I-U, a country? It makes things more puzzling.

I gently sloped my head beside Jeanne, with the surreal scene of her first experience with the drink bar.

We searched for a location where there were no people around. We occupied the 2-person table in one corner.

I realized that the iceless lemon tea Jeanne had brought had ice floating in it already. I dared not to sweat the details. If she can produce ice bullets, there's nothing unusual if she can conjure small tricks like that as well.

"Going back to our discussion, why did Riko want to become strong?"

I asked with lowered volume.

Jeanne blinked her slender, beautiful eyes.

"---For her freedom."

Jeanne answered with a hint of compassion to Riko.

"Freedom?"

"Riko grew up being imprisoned since she was a child."

W...What?

"The reason why Riko has a small physique, is because she barely ate anything at that time. Her body couldn't have the nutrients it needed to develop properly. She only wore worn-out clothes as well during that period, that's why she has a strong fancy for fanciful dress."

"Y-You're kidding, right? Although the Lupin clan are thieves, they should be affluent."

"You might not know it--- but the Lupin clan went downhill after the death of Riko's parents. Servants started leaving, and their assets were stolen. Although, recently I have heard that Riko retrieved back the gun that was a keepsake of her mother."

"The Lupin clan collapsed... and what happened to Riko?"

"Riko at that time was still small. There was a person who claimed to be a relative that would look after Riko. It turned out that it was a lie and Riko was carried from France to Romania. She was imprisoned there... for quite a long time."

The stupid girl Riko. That usually bright Riko. Who would have thought she had a dark past?

You must be kidding me. I still find it hard to believe.

"...No way. Do you know who imprisoned her?"

"I-U's no. 2, 'Endless Sinner Vlad'."

"Vlad..."

"It shouldn't be an unknown name to you. The place you'll be sneaking in is one of his mansions."

She knows about our mission.

Maybe Riko had told her about it.

Jeanne redirected her face to me as she noticed my sudden silence.

"Still, I can't tell you the information that I don't possess. Even I don't know the further details regarding Riko's imprisonment besides the one I told you. That is the only information that I obtained from Vlad. However... I can tell you about Vlad himself, just in case. After all, that guy is too dangerous."

"Dangerous... huh? Then wouldn't it be better to tell this to Aria instead?"

"No, you'd rather hear it. If Aria hears about this, she will charge straight to Vlad to carry out Riko's revenge, and ending up meeting her demise. It would even put my life in peril if that happens."

It will likely become a war if Jeanne told Aria about this but...

I, who has lesser combat effectiveness and investigation skill than Aria, can't attack Vlad. Jeanne's judgement was probably based from that reasoning.

I am being trusted here, in a negative way.

"From this point on, unless it's necessary, do not leak the details to Aria. Got that? First, about the Caucasus silver wolf that appeared few days ago. It's still under investigation but, from my conclusion, that wolf--- is no doubt, Vlad's minion."

"Minion...?"

"Think of it as Vlad's dog, but not leashed."

"...So, Vlad was already aware of our movements?"

"I don't possess a definite evidence yet to conclude that. After all, his minions are scattered all around the world and act like guerrillas, each one receiving orders from Vlad intuitively. It seems the wolf was stolen by a girl in the Snipe department though and no longer Vlad's."

What do you mean by 'all around the world'?

That's just like '007' that appears in Hollywood movies.

"...You know a lot about Vlad."

"My clan and Vlad are rivals. The Jeanne d'Arc twins three generations ago, joined forces with Arsene Lupin the 1st. The three of them fought Vlad together. The upshot of the fight--- was a draw."

"That was... Vlad's ancestor?"

"No. It was Vlad himself."

"W-Wait a minute. What year did that battle happen!?"

"1888. Back when Eiffel Tower was still half-built."

"H-Hey... Don't tell me that guy has been living for over 120 years? Humans can't live that long..."

"That guy is not human."

...Here it comes.

Here it comes! Here it comes! Here it comes!

Nothing can surprise me anymore. I dashed down the rest of the melon soda in desperation.

"Ah, that kind of topic eh? ...And what is it this time? A servant of devil? A mage? An alchemist?"

Sensing that the talk was heading beyond human logic, I steeled myself for the worst by randomly blurting out game jargons.

"Hmm... I am not sure how to describe it in Japanese words as well but..."

Jeanne did a finger-on-her-lips gesture. After a moment of contemplation...

"Oni (Demon). That's the closest word to describe him."

...Jeanne said that.

Demon, eh?

After wolf, comes a demon. The first two words in Shirayuki's divination were right.

"...Vlad is unnaturally obsessed with imprisoning Riko. He appeared in I-U in pursuit of Riko after she escaped her cage. Riko fought a decisive battle with Vlad, but she was defeated. Vlad was planning to put Riko back to her

cage, but seeing Riko's remarkable growth in her stay in I-U--- he proposed a contract to Riko instead."

"Contract?"

"If you can become an entity that surpasses the first generation of Lupin and show me a proof of that growth, then I will never bother you again."

"Surpass Lupin the 1st...?"

I muttered, and recalled the hijack that happened two months ago.

Riko said this at that time:

"Defeating Aria will prove my existence is better than Lupin the 1st."

The phantom thief Arsene Lupin and the great detective Sherlock Holmes fought each other around 100 years ago, but the fight ended up in a draw.

The descendant of Lupin, Riko, was too determined in defeating the descendant of Holmes, Aria. And in order to create the same condition, she even set me up as Aria's partner, the same role as Watson to Holmes.

That hidden motive was gradually getting elucidated.

"Vlad... What kind of guy is he?"

Jeanne paused for a bit for a moment to think, and then...

She took out rimless glasses from her chest pocket.

I perceived her perfect-sized breasts slightly swayed inside the uniform. I averted my gaze in reflex.

"Your eyes are bad?"

"Just slight astigmatism. I don't usually wear eyeglasses."

After saying that, next, she took out a notebook and a signpen from the black bag.

She opened the notebook...

"Explaining that monster with words will only confuse you. I will draw his appearance instead."

Kyu, making sounds as she drew with the signpen.

First, she drew a distorted flying saucer or something.

"Listen. Since Vlad is away, then there should be no problem in sneaking in his mansion but, if the one out of a million chance that he's back and you run into him--- abort your mission immediately and retreat. You cannot win against him. That is absolute."

With a serious expression, Jeanne started adding lines to that UFO saucer.

Kyu kyu kyu kyu

Seems like she's drawing a jagged head that looks like a green pepper now.

Eh, wait... Jeanne...

"In case you wind up fighting him, formulate a battle plan with escaping as the objective. According to the journal, the Jeanne d'Arc twins plugged silver bullets and slashed Durandal into his body--- but he never died. That guy is immortal."

Jeanne continued on drawing with the signpen.

Then she added wings... or maybe it's a tentacle, I can't really tell.

Jeanne... Your drawing...

"Although I haven't seen it directly, but after the battle with Riko, the only time he was defeated was against I-U's leader. After that, compiling the information that I gathered from I-U... one thing was made clear. In order to defeat Vlad, it seems you must hit his four weak spots around his body simultaneously."

Kyu kyu kyu

The signpen continued on making sound.

"Out of four weak spots, only three are known. Here, here and here. Long time ago, a paladin from the Vatican cast a secret spell upon him, putting an indelible eye-shaped tattoo to mark his weak spots. It's done. Good. It almost resembles the real thing."

Jeanne, claimed her work 'almost resembles the real thing'.

"W-What the heck... is that!?"



Jeanne's drawing is pretty horrible!

She sucks at drawing... real hard!

If I have to give an analogy, a grade-schooler's scribble in prikura is way better than her.

"Putting aside the question if it resembles the real thing or not. Can you explain to me what's that scribble that looks like it was done by a 3-year old kid?"

"S-Scribble!? T-That's rude!"

Jeanne's eyes glared at me behind those glasses, her face blushing.

As I thought, the person herself intended on seriously drawing the illustration.

"I swear Vlad is like this! You don't believe me?"

"Uhh no, it's not a problem of believing you or not... it's the problem of your drawi-- never mind. I commend your confidence for drawing that illustration despite your artistic skill."

"I'm telling you, this resembles the real thing. Keep it."

Jeanne seriously believed that she drew a masterpiece. She thrust the drawing onto me.

Oh man...

I feel like I'll be cursed just by keeping this thing.

Well, whatever... the mansion that we'll be sneaking into... this boss isn't there.

The only people present in there will be the manager. There will be no dread in fighting. In case that this monster is in there, we'll just have to flee... That's all.

But... don't let your guard down, Kinji.

A while ago, I lowered my guard and suffered a bitter experience, or rather, it was Jeanne herself who put me in that situation.

I'll take this scribble just in case.

4th Ammo: Infiltration

June 13th. It marks the start of our infiltration mission.

In the next 2 weeks, Aria and I will be infiltrating into the Koumeikan mansion as maid and butler.

During this time period, we will be taking temporary absences in class. Because of that, we need to ask for permission first. But when Riko submitted a ridiculous document to the Masters, titled like 'Civil Commission Teamwork Training' or whatever that was, it got easily processed without problem. This makes you wonder if this school is all right or not, in many senses.

And so, sticking to our original plan, the lineup is---Aria and I will be the main infiltration members sneaking inside. Riko will stay as a backup and act as an information relayer, equipment supplier, as well as being responsible for operation planning.

The Operation Stealing's (borrowing Riko's naming) objective is, the retrieval of Riko's cross.

We are having our rendezvous in front of the monorail station early in the morning. I was expecting Aria, who had received harsh maid training, to be more obedient but...

Aria appeared naturally, lugging a suitcase containing her private belongings, and ordered me to carry it in her stead. She's wearing a light pink, chiffon one-piece.

It seems people don't change that easily.

As I heave a sigh at that sad truth---

"Ki-kun, Aria, Hallo~!"

I heard Riko's voice.

When I raised my head...

(K-Kana!?)

As if the time went still, I stayed there motionless.

Kana.

Ah, no.

That was Riko disguising as Kana. First of all, it was Riko's voice, plus there is a difference in height. Kana should be as tall as me.

It looks the same as Kana a few years ago but... it's still different.

"...Ri-Riko... Why are you in that face!?"

I'm grateful that the Kana in front of me is just an imitation.

If it were the real thing... I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to extricate myself from the entanglement caused by mind paralyzation.

Yes. The real Kana...

Possesses a beauty that can make people around her feel like time had stopped.

That oriental, long-eyebrowed eyes, its gaze contains a power that can capture the hearts of any person regardless of their gender. Those lips that form a gentle smile, are like a rose petal, endowed with magic that can pacify even the most violent of hearts.

Aria, Shirayuki, Riko, Reki, and Jeanne are all beautiful. However... Kana's beauty exceeds those of aforementioned girls. No doubt, she's beyond ordinary. Kana should be expressed as a majestic existence.

"*chuckle* Vlad knows Riko's face. If my real face were caught by the surveillance camera, Vlad will return here. That's not a good thing, right? That's why I came here incognito."

"Then use another face! Why do you have to pick Kana of all faces!?"

I tried hard to restrain my emotions but, I still couldn't hide the agitation in my voice.

"Riko knows that Kana is the most beautiful girl in this world. Besides, Kana is an important person to Ki-kun. Riko only wanted to support Ki-kun with the face of the one he loves the most. Did I make you mad?"

Dammit!

"...I ain't a kid anymore to get pissed at every single childish mischief. Let's go."

"You're saying that, but I know you're happy deep inside."

Riko razzed at me. I replied with silence. I headed towards the ticket machine together with Riko.

"W-What's wrong Kinji? It's true Riko is using a face that is very pretty... but whose face is that? Hey---"

Aria who had been silently listening to our conversation, flusteredly asked that question.

However, I didn't turn around. Nor did I give any response.

"I said, hey! Kinji, Riko! Wait up! Tell me who that girl is!"

Can't help that you became like that Aria.

You probably never have thought that your slave, which you have been strongly monopolizing for yourself, has an affection to other people, and also this beautiful.

"HEY!! TELL ME WHO THE HELL KANA IS!?"

I'm sorry Aria--- I can't answer that. Forgive me.

The Tokyo northeastern rail is departing for Yokohama. Inside the train, Riko keeps on talking under the face of Kana.

There were no particular topics. Although I just give simple response like "Yeah" or "Is that so?" the whole time, it's just as Riko planned. Merely watching Kana's face makes me feel nostalgic. It's vexing to admit, but I am very happy right now.

(Still, this Riko... Who could have guessed that she had been imprisoned a long time ago...)

I contemplated as I stared at Riko (still in Kana's face) while we rode the bus after alighting from the Yokohama station.

I don't think Jeanne had fabricated all those things but, looking at this idiot girl whose bread and butter is mischief, it's still very hard to associate the word 'imprisonment' with her.

Therefore, I didn't question Riko regarding all that stuff.

I considered confessing everything to Riko and ask her the whole truth. However, I dropped the idea after watching her stuff an ice cream cone in her mouth, as if she was going on some field trip. The atmosphere doesn't allow for that kind of talk right now.

In the end, Riko and I spent the whole time talking about meaningless stuff just like normal friends.

While Aria was just frequently throwing surreptitious glances on both of us in anxiety. Her anxiety increased in intensity after riding the taxi to our final destination, the Koumeikan mansion.

The surroundings were dark despite it being noon. The mansion is located deep within the heart of a dense forest.

"I-It's like a cursed mansion..."

Aria's mumble is very precise. The mansion looks like a stage that will appear in a horror game.

The sinister aura that the mansion emits couldn't be perceived if you just looked at its photo.

Surrounding the mansion was a black iron fence which has its sharp-pointed end aiming towards the dark, heavy clouds. Inside the fence were beds of flowers.

I hope that this is just for today, the mansion itself is shrouded with creepy, thin mist.

Ah. A bat flew past me.

Aria, who fears this kind of atmosphere, couldn't help herself not to back away.

"Good to meet you sir. It was I who had an appointment to meet you at noon. Today, I have brought these two people who would be working as housekeepers."

Riko stated her greetings with a twitching face. After looking at the manager's face, I too, instantly bore a misgiving.

We just started the mission, and we already bombed it?

The manager who had greeted us is...

"Ahaha... This is quite a surprise..."

...the handsome part-time Butei instructor, Sayonaki. He's producing a wry smile.

Walking along inside the mansion's hallway, I noticed a flag of a wolf and a spear...? (or maybe skewer?) draping the wall.

Perhaps as a sign of long passage of time, its color is faded, and its decomposing features evoke creepiness to its beholder.

Hey, you there Aria. Stop making a frightened reaction at people's in-home decoration.

"Ahaha. You two Buteis wanted to work part time huh. Honestly, the work isn't really so difficult that anyone is capable of doing it, and we'll hire anyone who's up for the job but... Haha, what to say, this situation is kind of awkward."

Due to the recent wolf attack, Sayonaki's arm was still in plaster. He offered a seat to Aria and Riko. After confirming their taking of seat (probably a lady-first principle to him), he sunk himself into the sofa in the hallway.

I endeavored to act equably, occupying a seat in front of Sayonaki.

"Sayonaki-sensei. This is very astonishing. You were living in this grand mansion?"

"Oh. This mansion isn't mine actually. I just occasionally borrow the research facility here, and when I realized it, I had become like a manager here. One problem though, I have a disposition of becoming easily immersed on my research that I immediately lose track of my surroundings. I will be in great trouble if an intruder or two managed to slip by into this mansion during my supervision, so in fact, it is very reassuring that the housekeepers are actually Buteis."

A blessing in disguise.

It seems Sayonaki is intending to hire Aria and me as planned, which, ironically are the intruders he was talking about.

"---I am surprised as well. I have never thought I had been bringing in your students all along."

It appears Riko didn't really see this coming. She was bewildered at the sudden coincidence under the cover of deployment company staff.

"This will be a good subject to talk about when your Master comes back. Well, that's if he returns during their stay though..."

Riko discreetly confirmed if the master of the house, Vlad, was present or not.

"Oh. Right now, he's in a very distant place. I don't think he'll be back anytime soon."

I gained peace of mind upon hearing that.

It can't be helped right? Jeanne scared the hell out of me... with that horrible drawing.

And she said that the owner of this mansion is a demon and all that stuff.

"Is he... a very busy person?"

Riko, with Kana's face, asked Sayonaki.

"I am ashamed to admit... But honestly, I don't know the specifics about him. He and I are very close... but we haven't talked to each other directly even once."

Sayonaki said as he bitterly smiles. His answer is somewhat cryptic.

Close yet never talked to each other?

Are they like mail-friends or something? That's the best that I can puzzle out with my Normal Mode.

Riko left the mansion. We have our room assigned in the 2nd floor.

"I'm really sorry but as a rule... or should I call it a custom in this mansion, the housekeepers are required to wear uniforms at all times. You'll find uniforms of various sizes in your room that were tailored long time ago. Feel free to select the one that perfectly suits you. Regarding the details of the work, the previous housekeeper left simple reference materials in the kitchen. Read it, and do the work at your own pace."

Aha, Sayonaki showed a smile of a talented actor popular for his distaff sex.

"And again, I am deeply sorry. I'll be very busy in my research room. It's down in the basement. I spend a recluse-like life in there so I don't have much time to accompany you two."

Ah no, there's no need to apologize since you're the superior here.

"In case you're free and have nothing to do, let's see... There is a billiards table in the parlor. You can play with that. No one really uses it, so it's as good as new."

Sayonaki pointed towards the dim room in the side of the hall.

"And if you'll excuse me. Let me know when it's time for dinner."

Sayonaki said, and afterwards, he trudged down the spiral staircase.

After a few moments, we heard the shutting of a door.

He shut the door into his indulgence at once.

Woooooof...

Outside the mansion, we could hear the baying of a wild dog.

Abandoned in a broad hall, Aria and I looked at each other.

"...Should we get to work?"

"...Y-Yeah."

The first step according to plan was to work normally to gain the trust of the manager. We followed Sayonaki's order and changed into uniform.

I went straight to my assigned room and took out an old tail-coat from the closet.

The dress was an informal style. It has thick fabric and a shorter tail but... the size perfectly fits my body.

I tried it and...

It's done. A rookie butler is born.

...However, should I pity myself at how I look natural as a butler?

The mutual position of using people and to be used by other people. The latter suiting me better is definitely caused by being too disposed by living together with Aria. Or perhaps I have been innately endowed with this talent from the start.

Speaking of Aria...

Done changing (I even replaced my shoes), I knocked at the door to Aria's room, yet, no matter how much I wait, there was no answer.

(What are you doing? We should do our job promptly or we'll be suspected.)

...that is what we have discussed before.

"Hey Aria. We need to go to the kitchen soon."

I spoke to Aria beyond the door. There was no response. Maybe she didn't hear it.

Perhaps because of the door's thickness? Come to think of it, why are all things here, from blinds to curtains, all so thick? It's so dim here that it's giving me the creeps.

I can't afford to waste anymore time so I laid my hand on the knob and twisted it. *Gacha*. It's not locked.

"Hey."

Aria is too absorbed in checking herself through the mirror that she didn't even realize I went in.

"Uuuuu~~~"

She is blushing at her maid figure reflected through the mirror.

Thanks to Riko's training, she can manage to put it on. I-I don't have a thing for es but... it looks good on her.

She's cute.

No, she's adorable!

Awestruck at the serendipitous discovery of Aria's cute appearance, I unconsciously started the 'Dress Scan' skill that I learned from Inquesta.

First, the hairband, its anterior is frilled and its inside is laced. It seems the hairband itself is a duplex structure of an elegant style of overlapping frills and laces.

Around the chest area of the black maid-dress is an open area, exposed by a serried layers of pure white frills. She is wearing only frills as a replacement for a shirt.

Next is the apron. It is draping from Aria's slender waist to the front of the upper part of the miniskirt. In its opposite location, the belt is quite long, tied in a large butterfly knot above her butt. This contrast is very good.

Spreading outwardly from the short skirt are four layers, no, five layers of soft white petticoats. It precisely overlaps with several layers of skirts, as if like a carnation in full bloom.

It's not over yet. There's more coming. Bloomers adorn Aria's hips, jutting from the skirt, which is straight, yet vaguely suggests the curve of a lady. With the petticoat a while ago in combination, it seems the volume of the interior of the skirt exceeds the capacity and is on the verge of exploding.

The materials used were high-quality velvet, silk, and clearly an exquisitely crafted lace fabric. If this was 'the price is right' game, I would guess the price is around 1 million yen. Definitely not anything lower than that.

No doubt, this state-of-the-art maid dress is a national treasure.

By the way, this 'Dress Scan' is a skill that I learned in Inquesta. It is a method to analyze and memorize a person's characteristics, in order for investigation to proceed smoothly. There's definitely no ulterior intention here or anything like that. I'm telling the truth.

"W-Well... I guess it's not bad..."

The demon Butei must have realized that her own physical beauty is not simple and unusual.

She folded her arms in a hesitant manner, and nodded at herself.

It seems this supreme maid-dress had pleased Aria's eyes.

Aria, absorbed at her self-checkup, still hadn't realized my presence.

"I-I guess it's not bad... trying out a commoner's dress once in a while..."

...Commoner, huh.

Maybe you don't realize it, but normally you wear a sailor uniform everyday, which is like the ultimate symbol of being a commoner.

As I express a side remark inside my mind, Aria... a little bit stiff, formed a smile in front of the mirror. She can somehow manage a fake smile now.

And then--- twirl!

Probably the way the skirt spins and floats up appealed aptly to her. She spun around in place while producing sounds of shoe-tapping on the enamel floor.

For a moment, Aria's gaze met mine... smiling.

Aria did another spin. Her arms are bent like a girl. The laces in her cuffs, blossoming like a carnation, swayed and danced in the air.

Her gaze met mine once more. This time not smiling.

The satin apron garnished with frill-shaped garter on the hem fluttered...

pause

Facing this way, her movement stopped.

She has her fists akimbo.

And her face is a seething red.

And it looks demonically twisted.

Zun *Zun* *Zun* *Zun* *Zun*

She walk towards me, trudging the ground with heavy steps as if it should crack the floor.

"Ah no, Aria... there was no response when I knocked on the doo--ooouuuuhh!?"

Bam!

Aria abruptly leaped upward, and clutched my face with both her hips.

This posture seems like I am giving Aria a reverse shoulder-ride (my face in her crotch).

Covering Aria's white skin is a slightly translucent, see-through high-socks. Her right and left legs are adorned by back-ribbon respectively. The adorable white ribbon that emphasized her back figure, is now crushed on Aria's legs which are strangling my neck right now.

While in front of my eyes are frills, the other places are also frills, laces and more frills.

It's hard to tell which fabrics are what, now.

"And how can I serve you today? MAS-TER?"

Her anger might have probably gone over the limit. Aria's voice, although trembling, is calm.

Oh, you can finally say that line now. Must be thanks to the training.

I never thought that I would hear that line in this kind of situation though.

"Y-You don't have to do me any service in particular. Although, if you still demand for one then I order you to spare my life."

"If you peek at me again, I'll blast a hole in your brain. Got that!?"

Bah!

Maid Aria (still having my head pinned with her hips), drooped her body backwards towards the ground.

Spin My perception of top and bottom had reversed and then--- *Dogan!*

Aria pulled my head towards the ground until it crashed to the floor.

It dawned on me when I regained myself, after being knocked out for an hour that---

This is a pro-wrestling technique called Frankensteiner.

If you search the entire world for a maid who would do a violent skill like that to people, I'll place a bet that you will only find Aria.

Well, her martial art skill is 'no-holds barred' after all.

After a few days of working in the mansion, I finally realized---

Not just my own appearance is perfect for a butler, but it seems a fact that I also had a talent for being one.

Like I ever wanted a talent like that. But nevertheless, this is one surprising discovery.

Maybe due to originally living by myself prior to Aria's intrusion, I can do household chores properly. My hands seem deft as well.

In school, I am not the type of person to stand out and assert myself, so position-wise, that is like a butler.

And to top it all, my mentality of being solicitous to other people had been refined from cohabiting with Aria.

Well... of course I had to! If I fail to please Aria, then I'm as good as dead!

That being said, I do favors for Sayonaki, who's holed up in the basement doing his research stuff everyday, like bringing him newspapers, answering phone calls in his stead, etc. And while I do my housekeeper work perfectly at the same time, like standing watch in front of the mansion imitating a gatekeeper, I survey the mansion's layout, carefully, but efficiently.

I avoided the anti-theft cameras that were laid out around the mansion using the information that Riko acquired beforehand as a guide, I recorded the mansion's security device locations as well as Sayonaki's movement pattern.

Even though the reason I enrolled in Inquesta was because it was the sanest department out of everything in Butei, I never thought the skills that I had learned there would prove useful. It seems in life, all knowledge acquired will someday become profitable.

Day 7 of Infiltration. Time is around 10:30 PM. I was thinking of taking a shower when I glanced at the dark forest beyond the window. It's raining in deluge today as well.

Gorogoro!

Oh? That was thunder just now.

This year's rainy season has been having rain quite frequently.

I wonder how much mold has grown in the basement room Sayonaki has been hiding in by now?

".....?"

My cellphone is vibrating.

When I looked at the display, the caller was Aria.

"Hello."

"Hello Kinji? I-It's Aria."

Yeah, I know.

"What is it?"

"Ah... Uhm..."

...Huh?

What is this reaction? This is kinda like: For the meantime, I called him, but when he answered I didn't have anything to talk about -like situation.

"What's the matter?"

"Eh? Ah.. Uhh... Oh yeah! Let's play billiards. Come to the game room at once!"

---Play billiards.

This is a code that Aria and I had talked about before. It secretly means 'Report to Riko'.

It's true, tonight we'll be calling Riko for a periodical report but... that should be around 2 AM.

"It's still early for that. Besides, it's not something that must be done by two people. You can do it by yourself."

Flash

Gaga-nn!

Right when I finished my sentence, a deafening thunder echoed.

That one just now must be pretty close by.

"Hyah!?"

Hmm?

A silly-sounding anime-voice came from the cellphone.

"J-J-Just come here! When I say come, then you have to come! Got that!?"

Ahh.

I can pretty much predict what she'll say next.

"If you don't then you're windhole!"

Gacha (Sound of call being hung up)

Beep *Beep* *Beep*

See?

I have a dazzling history of Aria sending me to the abyss last month by drowning me in Tokyo Bay via her windhole festival. I don't want to taste the same experience again so therefore, I'll do anything at all costs to avoid Aria's windhole hell or whatever that name was, or I'll end up a mansion's stain just like a zombie in a survival horror game.

So I made my way to the parlor. I entered the room with a scowling face...

"You're late!!"

Growl!

Aria snarled. She's aiming at a billiard ball using a cue stick in an anxious state.

She's bending her body forward. The skin of her breast, inside the laces and frills covering it, irregularly shows itself for me to see.

Being in the border of 'visible' and 'hidden' makes it even more erotic. No matter how empty a washboard it is, a breast is still a breast. In any rate, it's best to get away from this angle.

Trembling

Kakon

As if to escape from something, Aria miscued after attempting a shot with trembling hands. At the same time, while trying to maneuver myself away from the angle of Aria's chest, I end up behind her butt.

(Uuu...!!)

This is even worse than the last one.

In the process of taking a shot with her cue, Aria has to droop her upper body flat upon the billiards table so in turn, her butt is thrusting upward in the back. Looking from this position, her skirt is soaring up in a dangerous fashion.

I had no choice but to avert my gaze towards the skylight.

Flash

Gaga-nn!

Another lightning strike. Its light flickered within the room.

There was a slight interval now between the lightning and thunder compared the last one.

"Hyauu!?"

Aria hopped in a pigeon-toed fashion, making the five-layer petticoats in the skirt's hem flutter in the air.



Flash

Here comes another one.

"K-Ki-Kinjiii---!"

With her eyes opened wide, she suddenly rushed this way and---

Clung onto me!

"H-Hey...!?"

Gaga-nn!

Aria tightened her grip from that thunder.

What's going on? What happened to the Quadra Aria-sama? Right now, she's no different than a kiddy girl!

"Kuuu~~~"

T-That's right... Now I remember. Aria is afraid of thunder.

During that time too with the hi-jack incident, her scarediness almost shrunk her height with how she shrunk back in one corner.

"Uuu~~~"

Tightly clutching the skirt's hem with a hand, Aria still didn't abandon the last pride as a noble.

She's implicitly saying, "I'm not relying on you or anything like that! Don't make any misconception!". Look who's the one clinging.

She averted her teary eyes away from mine, not intending to look this way.

(Uuu...)

The sweet aroma that I detect emanating from her hair tickles my olfactory senses. Right below my face is a hairband. It trembles with Aria's every shake.

Aria.

Within my chest are Aria's tiny shoulders. Her skirt fanned out, slightly caressing my waist. Behind her is a big butterfly knot.

Aria.

Aaahhh-- Dammit!

You're too cute!

It's almost making me go wild.

Petite body. Twin-tail. Little stern eyes. A quarter of English blood flowing within in her. I don't know which one of these qualities perfectly match this outfit but, in this mansion, Aria in maid outfit is like a life-size doll.

(...Shoot...!)

I'm changing.

This blood flow.

Something is starting to converge... in the very core of my body.

This is the Hysteria Mode's blood flow.

However... the transition is not fully complete yet. The sensation I am feeling right now is still in the level of 'she's cute'. For that to be promoted to the category of 'sexual arousal' needs an event or something to happen first.

If I can break myself away from Aria before that happens, and then calm my mind--- everything will turn out alright.

"I-It's okay. No need to be scared. I'll be with you."

Then I softly grabbed Aria's shoulders to separate myself...

"Uuu~~~"

Aria groaned. She probably doesn't see me as a reliable existence, my words aren't powerful enough to dispel her fear. She's looking up to me with her Camellia eyes tainted with anxiety.

This is bad.

It will be hell once she clings to me again.

Moreover, these anxious eyes. Due to the gap from normal, Aria makes it even more cute.

Is there a way to escape this predicament?

"Fine, fine. I'll call up a helping buddy then. Let's distance ourselves for now, okay?"

"H-Helping buddy...?"

"Right. He's somewhere in this mansion."

"B-But we're the only ones here! If you meant sensei, he's holed up in the basement..."

"Nonono... Not really."

I shook my head as I slowly back away. Then I went round behind the billiards table, bent down, and concealed my body from Aria's vision.

Okay. Here we go.

Producing a cellphone from my pocket...

I disengaged and placed Leopon(my cellphone's strap) on the top of the billiards table.

"Howdy, Aria! Leopon-kun here!"

I raised Leopon-kun's one leg as an act of greeting.

I want to slap myself for thinking up this nonsense... However, this is a necessary step in avoiding Hysteria. Sigh. For my loss.

"They call me the strongest beast on Earth! Oh!? Aria, aren't you making a scaredy face?"

Deliberately using a fake voice. I edged myself a little from the corner of the billiards table to check up on Aria's reaction.

Aria is nodding at Leopon-kun's every word.

Okay. She's listening.

"What's so scary? C'mon, tell me. Cough it up."

"...T-The thunder..."

Good. She's responding properly.

The first step, clear.

"Hah! Never fret! I will send that hubbub packing with my 'Rawr no Jutsu' special technique. RAAAWWWRR!!"

I spreaded Leopon-kun's legs, and posed him in a gesture of screaming a thundering yell.

"RAAAWWWRR!! RAAAWWWRR!!"

"W-Will it go away now?"

She's falling for it.

"Yeah. I scared the hell out of it with my intimidating technique. The annoying thunder must be running off to its mama now."

Well, this is not completely drivel at all...

This is something that I had learned from Nii-san a long time ago. Thunderclouds actually travel further away as the interval of the lightning and thunder widens.

And as if to corroborate my deduction...

Flash

A lightning with a weaker flash than its formers lit up, and after a while...

Rumble

The thunder this time was hushed that it's now a mere tickle in the ears.

"Y-You're right, it's going away now! Wow, you're so amazing!"

Aria was utterly deceived by Leopon-kun's empty power. She dashed towards the billiards table.

I hopped Leopon-kun in succession using my fingers as if to receive Aria.

Then she plucked Leopon-kun from my fingers... and squeezed it to her chest.

Subsequently, Aria shoved me out of the way with her hips, and they sank deeply into their own worlds.

Still, that Aria. She played along smoothly.

I'm already aware that she's weak to animals or stuffed toys, but I never thought it was this much.

Well, it must be Aria's way of fighting off the fear of thunder by placing a strong faith in Leopon-kun but somehow, it pissed me off at how much she trusted Leopon-kun.

No matter how I reassured her: "It's okay", it never relieved her anxiety.

You mean my existence is lower than a cellphone strap? Yeah, yeah. Is that so.

And so the lightning and thunder had subsided and the watch displayed 2AM. It's the schedule slated for contacting Riko for periodical reports.

If you ask what kind of communication gadget we'll be using, it was... just an ordinary cellphone.

Well, we're not doing an official mission this time around, plus, we're out here doing thieving instead. We couldn't request Connect for assistance. However, Japanese cellphones were actually embedded with a device that encodes signals before they are sent using a very complex encryption algorithm. So as a rule, the possibility of calls getting wiretapped is close to nil.

That being said, using a three-party call feature, the three of us: Aria, Riko, and I, had began our midnight tete-a-tete.

"---Aria, Riko, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you clearly. Riko, how about me?"

"Yayaa!! Double OK! Okay, from whom should we begin? Aria, what have you got today?"

Riko's voltage is high despite midnight. Are you nocturnal?

"Riko. The cross is kept inside the underground storage as you suspected. I caught a glimpse of it when I accompanied Sayonaki-sensei down there. It was a blue cross, right? It's small and kinda looked like an earring. It was placed on top of one of the shelves."

"---Yeah, that's my cross, Aria!"

"But Sayonaki-sensei spends all the time in the basement, making it hard for us to sneak inside. What now?"

I am lying down on my bed with my whole body muffled with a blanket as I spoke with whispered voice.

"Why did you think I sent you two there as a set? It's actually for this situation. This might be classic but we're gonna use the 'Lure Out' method. One person will act as a decoy to steer sensei away from the storage room and distract him, while the other person sneaks inside. Of course, the decoy must first gain the trust of sensei to make that possible. The person suited for the job is Aria. And for the particular steps of what to do..."

And so...

Using the information that we had gathered as foundation, Riko began improvising her plan.

A late night tete-a-tete with girls.

It sounded like what we're doing now is something what normal high schoolers may do, if taken literally. However, the topic wasn't something fun like TV shows or recent pop musics but instead a consultation for premeditated larceny.

This kind of scenario would be one of my hard-luck stories for attending this abnormal school.

Day 10 of infiltration, night time. A full-moon was visible beyond the window.

In the dining hall, Aria and I were serving Sayonaki dinner. We placed the dishes atop the wide table that could occupy 10 people or more without problem.

We didn't give the work more passion than perfunctoriness. Handling simple work with simple style in order not to attract suspicion is the basic of the basics of infiltrating.

"Today's grilled beef skewer is seasoned with Yuzukoshou."

I lifted up the silver lid and showed today's main dish to Sayonaki.

By the way, It was me who actually cooked this dish but Aria had to take the credit.

Thanks to the training, Aria was able to make omelets now, but that's just it for Aria's repertoire. When we try challenging a different menu, for some reason the kitchen would end up like the aftermath of war razing. And so we both gave up and I was appointed the task of cooking instead.

Well, my cooking skill isn't exceptional either, so I was on tenterhooks. Fortunately, Sayonaki was a man with an inaesthetic sense for gourmet and only requested for the most simple of cuisines.

---Like grilled meat skewer.

That's sufficient for him every night it seems. All I needed was to rare-fry the meat in a scant amount of oil. As for the seasoning, I can use anything except for one. Perhaps having an allergy to it, Sayonaki warned me not to use garlic. Other than that, there were no more specific orders.

He used chopsticks with awkwardness as his arm was still in plaster, although there was a sign of his body convalescing in good direction.

(But... Is his nutrient uptake balance okay at all?)

I wondered as I pull out the meat from the stick.

Well, it's probably not my business. I'm just a mere butler here anyway.

After that, what's left of my work is just standing by in one corner of the dining hall awaiting for further orders. What an easy job, if you think about it.

Sayonaki's old-fashioned phonograph is playing a classic music of nocturne.

"Fii Bucuros..." (Magnificent...)

Sayonaki muttered, as he gazed at the bed of roses in the yard illuminated by moonlight beyond the window.

"Doamne, te-ai vorbi limba romana...? Fii Bucuros...?" (Oh? Did you just speak in Romanian...? 'Magnificent'...?)

Maid Aria spoke in unfamiliar foreign language as she poured Sayonaki a glassful of red wine.

"...You surprise me. Where did you learn the language, Kanzaki-san?"

"It was the main language for communication back when I was enrolled in Butei High School in Europe. Sensei, how about you?"

"The owner of this mansion is a Romanian. We communicate with each other using that language."

Sayonaki looked at Aria with a gaze showing curiosity for the first time.

"How many languages can you speak, Kanzaki-san?"

"Umm... I can speak 17."

Holy God! She can speak seventeen languages!?

While I could barely speak Japanese, and the very reason why my classmates nicknamed me 'Gloomy'.

Aria's unbelievable feat like that forcefully reminds me that she's the descendant of Sherlock Holmes.

"Magnificent! And what another surprise! The number is the same!"

"Number?"

"With that roses outside."

"...What do you mean?"

Aria peered across the window, following Sayonaki's gaze.

In there, are a number of vivid red roses visibly in full bloom even under the darkness of the night.

"Those roses are actually cross-bred from 17 different types of roses, each attracting traits of them extracted and put altogether. It doesn't have a name yet. But I have decided to name it 'Aria'."

Aria's eyes widened at the sudden announcement of using her own name for a new breed of crimson rose.

"Fii bucuros(Magnificent)! Aria... what a wonderful name. Thanks to you, Kanzaki-san, I have found a perfect name for it. Ahh! I'm so happy... Aria!"

Perhaps the alcohol is slightly taking over his body, as Sayonaki swelled with delight.

It didn't seem Sayonaki had intended to sweet talk Aria like that. But that way of talking resembles mine closely from when I am in Hysteria Mode: Unintentionally saying out lines that girls are weak to.

Plus, he has the looks.

Aria didn't say anything in particular to Sayonaki after that.

She just stood by close to Sayonaki, maid-like, waiting until dinner is over.

Somehow... How should I put it.

I feel a very unpleasant air in there.

Despite that there's nothing unpleasant in particular.

...That just reminded me. Mutou mentioned a rumor regarding Sayonaki assaulting a high school girl.

I stood in one corner, ailed by an unknown cause of discomfort as the thought suddenly crossed my mind for an unaccountable reason.

Woooooooo, a baying of a wolf once again, echoed from beyond the forest.

We had a secret meeting the following midnight as well.

It seems the main operation will be done on the last day of infiltration, which will be in four days.

"Riko, Kinji, this might be bad. From what I gathered when I went down there to clean the basement, the security was tighter this time around compared the last time. I mean, the room is so sealed that not even an ant could pass inside. Not only you would need the physical key itself, they even added the requirement of an electronic card key, fingerprints, voice and retina recognition to unlock the room. Last time I checked, only infrared sensors were setup as a trap, but now they added a weight-sensitive trap under the floor as well."

"Wha...What did you say...?"

I unconsciously knitted my brows as I heard Aria's report from the cellphone held in one hand.

Even US military's confidential file storage would not even go that far.

With this much security, there is no way of getting inside that room.

After getting past the intricate locks to open the door up, now we have the infrared sensors to deal with. And even if we miraculously get past those grid of sensors, what awaits us is the weight sensor trap, which to describe simply, a single mistake of stepping on the floor means game over.

Why would they go that far for a mere cross?

"Okay. We'll go for Plan C21 then. Aria, Ki-kun. You just relax. No matter how hard they try to hide it, in the end, Riko's property belongs to Riko. I swear I'm gonna retrieve it back! Haa~!"

Riko is in high tension again. As I guessed, you're nocturnal.

"Let me change topic. So which one of you two are getting close to Sayonaki-sensei? Which one? Which one?"

"That should be Aria. She was overjoyed last night's dinner when Sayonaki used her name to name the hybrid roses."

I said my remark as if to pick on Aria.

"I-I was not! Stop fabricating lies, you idiot!"

"Watch out for him Aria, there's a bad rumor surrounding Sayonaki that involves girls."

"He... didn't look like a bad guy at all."

Maybe Aria is playing stubborn against me, she decided to take on Sayonaki's side. That obstinacy somehow fueled my exasperation's fire.

"No. If you ask me, he's more than suspicious. At the very least, I don't like him."

"Oh? Oooohhhh!? Could this be a matrimonial fight!?"

Riko joyfully cut in. In response, Aria and I both shouted "NO!" in harmony.

"Back to the plan discussion. We'll have Aria play the decoy role then. Aria, what do you think?"

"He is an arduous researcher; even if I manage to lure him out of the basement's research room, he'll want to return there immediately."

"Yeah. He usually stays up past midnight, I have no any idea when he sleeps... if he even sleeps at all. I wonder what he is researching?"

"We had a chat last time... He said something about cross-breeding and genetics or whatnot."

Hmmmmm...

I see. You had a chat with him. Without my knowledge.

Well, mission-wise, I guess this is necessary.

"Ki-kun, Aria. Can you give me a ballpark estimate of how long you can keep sensei away from the basement?"

"Let's see... About 10 minutes, based on his usual breaktime interval."

"10 minutes, huh."

Riko seemed contemplating something.

I think this one is almost impossible even for the phantom thief Lupin himself.

Well, it can't be helped. In order to accomplish the mission, we must overcome various obstacles: First, open the lock to the room. Second, grab the cross while avoiding the traps. Lastly, leave the room without any trace of intrusion. All must be accomplished within 10 minutes.

Furthermore, the one doing it is me.

Not to brag, but I'm not much different than an average joe. Being an E-Rank Butei and all.

"Can we somehow stretch the time limit to 15 minutes? Like for example, with Aria?"

"Me?"

"Using breast tactic... or not, after all you have none. How about letting him touch your butt to buy time? *chuckle*"

"I-I'm not a flirt like you dumbass!"

Everyone, I will be the one doing the work so please take this seriously.
Who demanded for a comic relief?

"Ahh, ahh. That was scary. Well, Riko will have to think up of a way for that. Mmkay, same time again tomorrow, got it? Rikorin is now signing off!"

Butsu.

Even on the phone, Riko displayed her dexterity in running. She resigned herself from the three-way party call immediately after hearing what she wanted to hear and after deciding matters that needed to be decided.

And that concludes today's report. Well, there wasn't much to talk about anyway.

I guess I should hang up as well.

Or so I thought...

"Kinji."

Aria, still on the line, called my name.

"...Hmm?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"...What if, and again I'm just talking hypothetically... What if I was overjoyed last night. Why would that make you mad?"

"...I wasn't mad."

"Aren't you now!"

Aria pointed out. I scratched my head.

What's up with you today? You sure wanted to pick a fight with me that badly.

"That's none of your business."

"....."

"I'm hanging up."

"Wait up. Let me ask this as well since we're in this topic... Who is Kana?"

My lips became tightly pursed as if I had been struck by paralysis.

I don't know how Aria interpreted that silence but...

"Was she your... uhmm... you know..."

...while stumbling over words...

"E-Ex-girlfriend?"

...she asked that question.

Even if I decided to settle the question with silence, I am sure Aria would just wait it out until I say something.

...No choice.

"This time Aria, that matter is absolutely none of your business."

I was aware that my tone is being harsh.

But, I have no way of answering it other than this way.

Aria was in silence for a while. And then...

"...You're right. This is none of my business."

...with a submissive tone unlike her usual attitude, gave up pursuing on the issue.

"Everyone... has a past they never want to disclose to others. I don't know what has gotten into me but... that one just now was stepping over the line. For some reason, I can't get over your reaction back when you first witnessed Riko in Kana's face. But don't worry, this will be the last time you'll hear me asking it. I'm sorry, Kinji."

Hearing Aria apologize like that somehow struck a sincere and dignified impression instead.

Aria is usually a violent girl but, she apologizes properly when she is really at fault.

Like last month, when I had caught a cold in the process of tasting her punishment, she bought a cold medicine for my sake.

Also...

Aria. You are really Sherlock Holmes's descendant.

Too bad you didn't inherit his reasoning ability, but your intuition is at prodigy level.

You're right about the anomaly you felt from me...

The affection I have for Kana, isn't an ordinary one.

Just like this time. A single mention of her name was enough to make me lose my calm to the point that it's scary.

I put on equanimity, bottling up my true feelings. Then I answered...

"You don't have to apologize. And I'm sorry as well for being harsh."

"I-It's fine. You don't have to apologize too."

"I'm gonna hit the sack."

"Okay... Rest well."

"Good night, Aria."

"...Night, Kinji."

Aria's voice... still sounded bothered about Kana.

...Forgive me Aria.

I can't tell you.

Right now, I can't.

5th Ammo: 296 Meters Above Ground Billiards

The final day of infiltration had arrived.

The main operation initiates at 5PM, exactly one hour before we depart the mansion...

As planned, Aria had managed to lure Sayonaki out of the basement by asking him to accompany her to the yard and was buying time by asking details about the Aria (the hybrid roses).

And while they were busy with their fake date in the yard...

I started taking action, under the pretense of packing my luggage.

The billiard table in the parlor was the mission's starting point.

"Riko, can you hear me? The mole shall dive now below the ground. Over."

After gearing up in equipment familiar from back in my Assault days (open-finger gloves, thermal goggles, and Kevlar suit), I checked the cellphone that I fastened behind the billiard table, leaving it on call as it sends a signal to Riko.

"I can hear you clearly. Your voice sounds sexy over the phone as always, Ki-kun."

Pretending I never heard that, I silently flipped up the wooden floor under the billiard table.

Sayonaki and maid Aria are in the rose garden right now, having an elegant talk about the roses.

Meanwhile, I turn into a human mole, attempting the biggest challenge of my life called stealing.

Even though this is the only way to earn the lead about Nii-san, it somehow feels that I had lost a lot of important things as a human being in undertaking this job.

I derisively mull about that thought as I enter the tunnel that I had gradually dug during my stay here.

"Kinji here. The mole has changed into a bat."

With a low voice, I spoke to Riko via cellphone through the intercam.

The success of the mission lies with the efficient use of time, so Riko had devised a bold strategy that would require much shorter time than the initial plan by avoiding going through the storeroom's threshold.

Originally named, 'Mole Bat' by Riko. This is the solution that she came up with.

To explain it simply, first, we have to dig a tunnel from the ground floor going straight through the storeroom's ceiling, then use that pathway to sneak inside the room. Finally, just like a bat, I'll be suspending my body upside-down from the ceiling as I work on grabbing the cross.

Disregarding the danger of blood accumulation in my brain... Actually, this tactic is like killing two birds in one stone.

Due to the newly placed trap, the alarm will go off if we step on the pressure-sensitive floor.

By putting all of the problematic factors into consideration and finding a way of circumventing them, just what you'd expect from the descendant of phantom thief Lupin.

"7 minutes left, Ki-kun."

Within the dimness of the storeroom, I spotted the cross openly laid out above the rows of shelves.

However, I knew that was not the case once I put on the thermal goggles. I can see horizontal, vertical, diagonal; a convoluted system of infrared lights guarding the treasure.

If one of those rays had been disrupted, even if it was a millisecond disruption, the alarm will buzz off, screaming the end of our mission.

In other words, even if we use a fishing wire to try fishing for the cross, it will touch the infrared beams no matter how dexterously you do it.

Reaching the treasure with a straight line is impossible.

So what now?

The method Riko had thought up...

"Okay Ki-kun. Time to start 'Operation Rail'. First... Z1. Then connect it with A10."

I was broadcasting a video of the infrared lights' structure to Riko via the miniature videocam built into my intercam, then packet sending it via cellphone in the parlor room.

As Riko watched that...

I followed her orders, connecting the wires that I had kept from the vest pouch.

"B11, F23, A7, B15... 2 of them, C19, C5, A13..."

Assembling the parts according to Riko's direction, the finished product would be a rail.

A rail of wire that will curve around that countless infrared beams.

Still--- Riko is really a genius despite being a thief.

Koumeikan is outside of **HSUPA** (High Speed Uplink Packet Access). Transmission of data could only be done through ordinary communication network. Because of the reduced speed of signal transmission, the visual data sent will not be as clear as normal. But to have a complete grasp of the situation and make a correct judgement despite that...

"E12, C7, A16, A13, D6..."

Riko's voice, leaking from the intercam's headphone, is serious, different than usual.

5 minutes left.

The assembled wire slowly crept its way into the goal, as slow as it could give one impatience by watching it,

Calm down Kinji. Do not make an elementary mistake such as involuntary sneezes. Even a slight tremble of hand would shake the wire, making unintended contact with the infrared lights. Everything is over if that happens. Extend the wires carefully to the cross.

Inside the sultry sealed room... Even mere sweat brings a danger.

That is, a single drop of sweat is enough to activate the floor-trap alarm.

"C7, A16, A13, D5... That should do it, Ki-kun."

Following Riko's voice, the tip of the assembled rail of wire, complicatedly twisting and curving...

Chari

...had finally reached the cross.

"I'll slide down the hook now."

I produced an S-shaped hook from pocket, hanging it on the curtain rail.

Attached to the hook was an ultra-thin wire made of nylon which will spiral around the wire as it slides its way down to the cross like a miniature jet-coaster.

Chaki

The cross, with its structure probably made to dangle itself as a pendant, easily caught the hook.

"I'll start pulling it in."

"Hurry Ki-kun. We took more time than expected."

Hustled by Riko, I swiftly spun the reel in my hands.

And started reeling in the cross that was caught in the hook...

Ugh... this is harder than I expected.

"Damn!"

The hook stopped at one-tenth of its way back. Well, I was compelled to. If I try to forcibly expedite the reeling, the cross would sway and might risk contact with the infrared lights.

"Ki-kun. We're in the soup."

"What happened?"

"There's a sign from Aria. Sayonaki is coming back."

"What did you say!?"

"It suddenly rained outside!"

...Curse it! To rain at a time like this!

We're still in the midst of the operation.

There's no getting out of this if Sayonaki caught us red-handed.

"Aria, Ki-kun needs more time. Can you do something to keep him occupied?"

Riko ordered Aria.

Aria receives orders from Riko via wireless earphones hidden inside her ears and a micromic concealed inside the maid uniform.

Currently, the communication line between me and Aria was closed so I can focus on my work. However...

"Riko. Connect me to Aria. I want to know what's going on."

"Got it."

Momentarily after Riko's answer...

I can hear Aria's voice, and Sayonaki who was a short distance away from her, through the intercam.

"Sayonaki-sensei!"

"What is it?"

"Ah, umm, it's nothing. Uhh..."

"...Huh?"

"Today has good weather, doesn't it?"^[22]

"Eh...? But isn't it raining?"

"EH!? Ah... umm... Ah! Actually, I'm fond of rain! Ahahaha!"

A-Aria...

Can't you give an excuse a little better than that?

Aria is the type that will keep digging her own grave the more she gets confused. She's the type of person not suited for Inquesta.

"D-Dammit!"

As I shout my disgruntlement...

Butsu

From Riko or Aria's line, whichever it was, came a sound of disconnection.

Could this be one of commoner's telephone line defect!? Sometimes the line hangs up for no apparent reason.

What an unlucky day. A string of unfortunate happenings at a time like this. I wonder who had lost the transmission signal?

"Aria. Seriously, if it comes to this, let's resort to 'Honey Trap'^[23]. As Ki-kun had already mentioned, Sayonaki is a womanizer according to rumor. This is our last resort but I'm pretty sure this will be very effective."

Riko's voice was flustered.

It seemed the disconnected line was Aria's.

"O-Okay!"

Huh?

Aria is properly responding.

So there was no line disconnection at all?

What was that unusual sound that I heard a while ago then? Just a noise?

"Sayonaki is a man. Just make a false confession and embrace him. It doesn't matter even if it's out of nowhere. Say that you love him and repeat that line 10 or 20 times to paralyze his thoughts. And afterwards, take him to a sofa or any place that you can lie down."

"I-I guess we don't have a choice."

Right now I am hearing an unbelievable talk. Done by both girls.

"Generally, guys... have a particular spot that they like in a woman's body. For example, breasts, hips, etc. Some prefer kissing. Start by letting him do you as he pleases."

"A-And then... what should I do?"

H-Hey, hey.

Aria, are you really serious about doing this?

"Once you've discovered his preference... pretend that you 'liked it'. We can easily buy 5 minutes that way. If things went smoothly, a man would keep doing that for 10 or 20 minutes."

"---I got it. I'll do my best to hold him off."

What a crude plan!

But could it be the reason that convinced me of the effectiveness of the plan was because Riko had done similar things to me before?

"...But before I do that, Kinji. Listen to me."

"What?"

"Even though it was not my true feelings... but before I'd do that to Sayonaki... I have something I want to tell you."

"So what is it? Make it quick, can you? I can't afford to waste anymore time here."

"I love you."

...HUH!?

"Ever since the hijacking incident... I have... fallen for you."

"...Ho-Hold up!"

This isn't the right time for that kind of talk you know!?

"That's why... I want you to do the same thing to me after Sayonaki had done all of that. So please don't be jealous. I'll let you do me two-fold than what Sayonaki will... no, until you are satisfied."

"Wait up!!"

T-This can't be!

What the hell is that idiot trying to suggest in this situation!?

"I don't mind doing it the whole night with you, or even during school. I'll do whatever you want me to do...."

Dammit... Aria, you... utilizing a lonely anime-voice like that is unfairly below the belt!

Aria. You don't realize how irresistibly cute your voice is. It made my mind stop working and become entirely full of it. Why don't you quit Butei and audition for seiyuu instead?

You just triggered my Hysteria Mode with that!

It got me, unintentionally.

Aria's sigh-sounding "I'll do whatever you want" line...

...had pulled my Hysteria Mode's trigger.

"...Tch..."

The moment I entered Hysteria, I could not keep myself from clucking my tongue upon realization...

That I've been had.

"You've done it... Riko."

"Baka Kinji! By saying that means you have turned into that state? Kufufu."

Riko chuckled, and only said the last line with her own voice.

That last 'Butsu' sound was Riko severing Aria's line to us.

And the Aria-Riko conversation that subsequently followed was actually Riko's one-person farce using her own unique ability to mimic people's voices.

"Ki-kun, you really turn into Hysteria easily with Aria. Riko is a bit dissatisfied!"

"Riko... you're such a bad girl. I'll give you a spanking later as punishment."

"Hauu~ Riko sees that as a reward instead!"

As we indulge ourselves with prattling...

My hand never once showed a least bit of a pause from its machine-gun paced reeling.

The hook, together with the cross, sailed along the rail as though I was watching a fast-forwarded video.

After grabbing it, I slid down a replica of the cross onto the rail.

Shurururu Making its way down the rail of wire...

The replica cross successfully landed on the spot no different from where the real cross was originally placed.

Not even sparing a second, I initiated the retrieval of the wire rail.

There's no dread of touching the infrared beams this time around.

To me, the process this time is as simple as walking while avoiding bumping into people in a train station.

Lastly, I picked myself up through the ceiling's hole...

Patan

...and sealed the ceiling's panel. Mission Accomplished.

Ultimately, my hide was saved again by Hysteria Mode. However, the Hysteria Mode this time was short-lived and subsided quickly.

Phew...

I am now afflicted by Hysteria's after-effect despondency and the regret of blurting out cheesy lines. Fortunately, the girl this time knows my circumstances. I guess it's okay to shrug the worry off.

What happened after that, it seemed Sayonaki had returned to the basement right after I left the storeroom.

In the end, Aria's desperate attempt in buttonholing Sayonaki with her weather talk was in vain. Well, with that kind of topic, you can't really blame Sayonaki.

As I recount those details in my mind, Aria and I changed to our usual clothes... or precisely to our Butei uniform, and departed the mansion.

Although Sayonaki followed to see us off, he didn't particularly endeavor a superfluous talk. He bade us farewell laconically, and went back to his research room.

Cross-breeding or genetics or whatever it was that he is researching... He really is so ardent.

And so...

Aria and I alighted from a taxi in Yokohama Landmark Tower, a skyscraper that lies within the proximity of Yokohama station.

Somewhere in this office building where the kernel of Minato Mirai 21 is situated, was where Riko had setup her hideout.

That time as well during the bus-jack in Daiba, Riko seems to display an inclination of using a modern hotel or building in taking up her position.

According to the details on where to hand over cross... the meeting place will be the roof.

Well, what we are handing over is a stolen item. I guess it has to be done someplace private without the eyes of people.

A warm and humid gust blew through the rooftop of the Landmark Tower.

According to the guide in the ground floor's elevator hall, the building is 296 meters high. It is famous for being the highest building in Japan.

Is it just me? It seems the sailing dark clouds are within reach.

First of all, the rooftop is closed to the public. People who have no business in this place are denied access, hence, the absence of people disregarding us.

As we reached the heliport, a slightly elevated square platform became visible. There is no fence installation surrounding it.

"Ki-kuuun!!"

Riko skittered this way as the wind brushed her honey-blond hair and flapped her frilled-customized skirt.

And then... *Grab*

Hugged me!

"Ki-kun, Aria. You two are really an amazing duo! You have done something beyond Riko's capability! Riko is stoked in awe right now!"

Riko's two-fold eyes glittered with joy. She's looking up to me from my chest.

Other than her two-sided up hair-style, a ridiculously big red-ribbon on the top of her head enhanced the adornment. It's like a hair-style of a girl that appears in fairy-tales.

Riko, like Aria, is child-faced... but even Riko's preference for accessories is puerile.

"Kinji. Let's hurry up and get this business over with. Somehow, seeing that flirt in a good mood gets under my skin."

"Hey, hey Arian. Are you jealous because I might take Ki-kun from you? I can tell."

And who is Arian? I threw a side remark in my mind.

Riko rubbed my chest with her cheek, as she threw a sidelong glance to Aria.

"I'm not! Mukiiiiiiiiii!"

Aria screamed with a sound similar to a screech of a broken violin.

Ignoring that, I took out the blue cross from my chest pocket.

"This is what you wanted right? I'll give it to you if you get off me."

When Riko saw the cross, she swiftly grabbed and attached it to a slender chain dangling on her neck.

"Otsu! Otsu! Ran! Ran! Ruuuu!"

When Riko let out an inexplicable shout of joy, next she chopped her temple with both hands (like doing a weird salute) and then swung her fists wildly all over. If you ask me, it's a bearing of someone high on drugs.

Riko, I know you're happy. But can you stop jumping in front of me?

Don't forget you're wearing a skirt.

The swaying of your frills is distracting as well.

"Riko, cut out the weird antics. It's your turn to fulfill your part of the deal."

Aria, with face twitching and hands folded, reminded Riko of her promise to us.

Hmm... Aria is seriously pissed off.

Riko said...

"Aria... you are really underestimating Riko. Don't you think so too, Ki-kun?"

What do you mean?

When I walked closer... Riko thrust the huge red-ribbon that's fastening her honey-blond hair to me.

"I actually brought a more appropriate present for your hard work. Ki-kun, please unwrap Riko."

Huh...? I'm not sure I am following this. Will this mean a contract sealed once I untie this?

I reached for Riko's ribbon and untied it blithely.

"*chuckle*"

Chu

I didn't have an inkling of what had happened.

Because it completely took me by surprise.

When I noticed Riko inclining her head diagonally...

She was actually going to kiss me!

---Kiss.

Yes. Riko kissed me.

Her breath that was redolent with the smell of vanilla aroused my olfactory senses.

It resembled the scent of a sugar milk or a candy or a honey.

But contrasting that immature aroma, her lips were furnished with the voluptuousness of a ripe woman.

And that gap made me...

".....!!!"

Turn into Hysteria Mode...

Instantly!

Not again!?

"Fhwaa."

Riko pulled her lips away from mine, stopping at 1-centimeter distance and smiled. Our noses are still kissing each other.

Lick

She even licked my nose as an extra.

"Ri...Riririkoooo!?"

From side, Aria expressed her incredulousness like an emergency alarm.

"Just what are you trying to pull out of the blue!?"

Aria admonished. Riko, did not give any excuse...

Tatan *Tata* (Tumbling)

But she did a series of smooth sidesaults, circled around through the edges of the roof.

Ton (Landing sound)

And as if to sever our only escape pathway, she stood with her back on the door, blocking the way leading downstairs.

The damp summerwind swept Riko's honey-blond hair.

"I'm sorry Ki-kuun. Just like what you had said: Riko is such a bad girl. Once Riko had gotten back the cross... all of her desired cards will be assembled."

Riko smirked... That smile is the same one I saw back in the hijacking incident.

Oh that's right. I also said this to her back when I Hysteria'd in the mansion's basement.

"I'll say this once more... 'Riko, you're such a bad girl'. I know you're lying about your promise. Still... I forgive you. Because to me, a lie committed by a girl isn't considered a sin."

Great job Hysteria Kinji. With you and your cheesy lines.

"It's true I had said that. But I don't think my master thinks the same."

Explaining Aria's reaction would rather be unnecessary, she's obviously fuming with anger...

And at the same time, motionless as if she had witnessed something unbelievable.

...Ah, I see.

It's her first experience witnessing other people's... well, to be precise, the kissing scene between Riko and me. I'm pretty sure it was too much for her.

"Aria."

Pachin

Making a snap with my fingers...

"Hah!?"

Aria disabled her petrify mode and switched to blush mode with fangs bared as add-on.

"Well, I somehow had a hunch that the affair would end something like this. My decision was right after all for wearing a safety vest just in case this happens. Kinji, prepare yourself for battle. I will need your assistance."

...As you wish.

"Kufufu. Yes. That's more like it Aria. There is no flaw in Riko's scenario. Everything will proceed according to her plan. Using the two of you to retrieve the cross, and then defeating you both afterwards. Ki-kun, give it your all too. Since Riko had even sacrificed her first kiss for this battle's preparation."

What can I say? Well, I guess that's an honor.

"I'll give you an advantage, Holmes... This place is outside of Butei school. That would be easier for both of us right?"

From her skirt...

Riko pulled out two Walther P99's with both hands.

"Heh. That's nice of you. Now that makes it a legal 'self-defense' excuse."

As if like a mirror image of Riko, Aria did the same.

She pulled out the handguns unbefitting of her tiny hands--black and silver Colt Government--with both hands.

"Before I blast a hole on you... tell me one thing. Why were you desperate in retrieving that cross? I could only have vague ideas. Because it was a keepsake of your mother? That's not the only reason, right?"

Using the gun, Aria pointed to the cross dangling on Riko's neck.

Riko drew the Walther to her lips... and laughed.

"...Aria. Have you ever been called 'Brood Bitch' before?" (T/L Note: there are kanjis above Brood Bitch, 「繁殖用牝犬」 which literally translates to: A female dog for reproduction use.)

"Brood Bitch...?"

"Have you ever experienced living in a cramped cage? Have you ever experienced eating nothing but rotten meat and drinking dirty water because it was the only meal provided to you? You know, like those dog breeders of bad type. Just because they wanted to breed a dog with good pedigree as excuse... they lock up the dog in a cage and abuse them. There has been news like that. I'm sure you have seen one before. That's exactly what I'm saying. Imagine the human version of that."

Riko laughed as she tells her story using fierce body language.

Under the fast-sailing clouds, a bizarre mood or something similar hung over the landmark tower's roof.

"What... are you talking about?"

As if to interrupt Riko, Aria shoved both hands forward.

And as if that acted as a signal,

Riko's face suddenly turned abominably evil.

I felt a cold chill ran down my spine, making me breathless.

---It's similar. From that time during the hijacking---

"DON'T BE KIDDING ME!! ARE YOU SAYING I'M JUST A GENE!? A NUMBER 4!? HELL NO I'M NOT! I'M NOT! I'M NOT! I AM RIKO! RIKO MINE LUPIN THE 4TH! NOT A TOOL TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE 5TH!"

In the midst of Riko's hysteria, she is not directing her shouting anymore to Aria, but to an invisible person in the air.

Those words don't connect to the talk with Aria. It's fragmented, and its meanings are loose.

Rather, it's a product of Riko's unleashed burst of emotion.

Flash

Gorogoro

From the distant sea, a faint thunder echoed. Aria jumped at her toes.

The seabreeze blew past us that it made me think for a moment it smelled of Riko's alluring vanilla scent.

"Aria... You asked why am I so desperate in retrieving this cross, right?"

Riko smirked. Her gaze piercing Aria.

"This isn't an ordinary cross. Riko's beloved mother had told her this when she was still alive: 'This treasure is worth something so far beyond imagination that even the combined assets of Lupin household can't match its worth.' That's why Riko was resolved to protect this cross at all cost that

she kept it hidden inside her mouth the whole time she was imprisoned, making sure that Vlad won't be able lay his finger on it. And then..."

Riko paused, her two mini-twintails...

...had moved to life.

That scene reminiscent of Medusa, a monster that appears in mythology, had compelled my feet to move one step back.

"...And then one night, Riko had discovered. This cross... no, more precisely, the metal that makes up this cross, has a power to endow Riko this power! And by utilizing this power, Riko had finally managed her breakout!"

Riko's twin tails pulled out two knives that were hidden under her collar.

Quadra.

Same title as Aria... But with a different connotation this time. Because Riko is wielding 4 weapons at the same time.

"Come Holmes... Let's end the destiny between us. I'll defeat you, and today will mark the day Riko surpasses her great-grandfather."

Riko leveled the handguns at us. The left one to Aria. The right one this way.

"Holmes, and Kinji Tohyama... YOU SHALL BECOME MY STEPPING STONE!!!"

Riko bellowed. At that moment...

BBZZZZTTTTT!!!

A sound resembling an electric spark momentarily resounded.

Riko's adorable face suddenly evinced grimace... and with half-turned head, she muttered...

"...W...hy...are you... here...?"

Riko's body pitched forward, and collapsed to the ground...

...revealing the figure of a man behind her.

"Sayonaki-sensei!?"

When Aria called the name of the man, Sayonaki-sensei dropped the large-sized stun-gun, probably used for subduing beasts, to the ground.

And without a second thought he pulled out a pistol from inside his chest pocket, then aimed it at the back of Riko's head.

Both the plaster and the bandage that's supposed to be wrapping his hand were now gone.

Was it healed now? Or rather, it seemed like it didn't suffer an injury from the start.

"Tohyama-kun, Kanzaki-san. Can you stay where you are for a few moments?"

The gun that Sayonaki was gripping gave me scowl, because the model rings a bell.

It's among the illustrations of guns shown to us in class back in my Assault days.

I believe it was... that's right.

Cugir M74.

An automatic pistol manufactured in Romania during its socialist era.

For being a mere citizen, why does he possess a pistol of such a rare model?

Sayonaki...

This guy is not the regular manager he appears to be.

When I sharpened my directed glare...

Behind him, from the stairs...

Grrrr... Rrrrr....

Appeared wolves, the same as the beast that we encountered in the Butei infirmary.

This time, not just one, but two.

"You should keep your distance. I ordered them to assault you if you come any closer than that."

Hearing Sayonaki's words, I tried lifting one toe, testing if it's not a bluff, and then... the two wolves glared immediately at me.

According to Jeanne, the wolves are supposed to be 'Vlad's minions' but...

Why are they following Sayonaki's orders?

"Quite surprising that you control them. So your injury... and the wolf's assault was all part of your act?"

"I could say at least it was better than your maid and butler farce."

Sayonaki laughed. One wolf on his feet stirred a motion.

As if it was exhibiting a trick, the wolf picked up Riko's guns and knives, swiftly carried it to the edge of the rooftop, and disposed it below.

"I hope you hold your position there. You see, this gun had been manufactured 30 years ago and is quite old. Its trigger is a bit unsteady. It'd be regretful if I slipped on pulling the trigger and unintentionally shot Lupin the 4th."

Lupin the 4th.

Sayonaki called Riko by her real identity.

I'm not certain how strict Riko intended in hiding her true identity. Regardless, besides Jeanne, Aria and I, there is no one in Butei High school that knows Riko's identity.

Vlad must have told Sayonaki that information.

Then it'll be natural to deduce that, Vlad had also notified Sayonaki that Riko was after the cross kept in that mansion.

And that explains the sudden heightening of security in the storeroom.

The reason why this guy is already here in a matter of minutes after we have stolen the cross, must be because he had known all along that Aria and I were infiltrators... ever since the beginning.

"What is the meaning of this...? Why do you know Riko's real name? Don't tell me... You are Vlad!?"

Beside me, the no-talent-for-deductive-reasoning Aria had brought up a new theory of 'Vlad = Sayonaki'.

However...

"He will arrive here within a few moments. The wolves are also sensing his imminent arrival. See? They are getting excited."

Sayonaki's immediate refutation of Aria's claim made her face burn in embarrassment.

"I-Is that so? But still! After hearing the details about Riko and borrowing his minions, you said a half-month ago that you haven't talked to him directly before. What a great liar you are."

"I wasn't lying when I said that. Vlad and I, are destined not to meet each other."

"...You also said this before: 'Right now, he is in a very distant place'. But the truth is you called him immediately after that. The reason why you had played along despite knowing everything was because you realized that you couldn't defeat us alone. That's why you waited it out until Vlad returns. Am I right?"

Well, putting aside Sayonaki's statements. Aria is trying too hard for the department she is not good at.

Meanwhile, I initiated analyzing the current situation.

Sayonaki's combat effectiveness, judging by how amateurishly he gripped the gun, needless to say, does not pose a threat.

However, the problem is that he has Riko as a hostage.

So long as the hostage is a girl, my Hysteria Mode will prevent me from taking a drastic action.

That would be the case for Aria as well. She can't afford to lose Riko, a precious witness in obtaining her mother's freedom.

Plus, Sayonaki had two wolves on his side.

Moreover, Vlad will arrive here in any moment. An adversary that is more powerful than Jeanne or Riko.

...We are at a disadvantage. And in a hopeless plight to add.

"Tohyama-kun. Shall I give you a supplementary lesson?"

I returned my gaze to Sayonaki from the sudden call of my name.

"...Supplementary lesson?"

"A supplementary lesson for the make-up quiz that I will give you, for not being able to complete the quiz because you were busy engrossing yourself in an act of debauchery with Lupin the 4th."

Hearing that, Aria shot a malevolent glance here, despite the current situation.

Let's not worry about that for now.

Why did Sayonaki suddenly bring up that topic?

I knit my brows. Sayonaki resumed his unilateral lecture.

"Genes... are very capricious entities. If good traits from parent's genes are inherited, the result will be an excellent offspring. But what about the other case? If bad traits from both genes are inherited instead, the result will be an incompetent offspring. Lupin the 4th, is exactly that case."

Sayonaki paused, then kicked Riko's head near his feet.

Sayonaki did that as if he was kicking a trash bag, showing no compassion at all.

"10 years ago, I researched Lupin the 4th's genes upon Vlad's request."

"S-So it was you... the bastard who suggested... all those rubbish things to Vlad...!" (T/L: Riko is talking in a very rough language here.)

At Sayonaki's feet, Riko talked in rough language as she writhed to resist the paralysis induced by the stun-gun. Her face twisted in great agony at the struggle of raising her head.

"And can you guess what I have found out?"

"S...Stop...! T-This has... nothing to do... with Holmes... and the others...!"

"Lupin the 4th's gene never inherited any good traits. Nothing at all. Not even a single one. So genetically speaking, an offspring like that would be

an incompetent existence. This is an extremely rare case, but these cases do happen."

Riko turned her face away from us, and buried her face to the ground as if feeling shame from that ignominious revelation.

She really, didn't want other people to find out that truth, I can conclude that without doubt upon seeing that reaction. But contrary to her desire, the unwanted disclosure was mercilessly done in front of her, and what's more, to someone who she considered a mortal rival.

Thunder echoed from beyond.

"You're aware of your incompetency more than anyone else, 4th-san. I only corroborated that fact by providing you scientific proof. Just like this. You are no different than the 1st who could not successfully steal anything by himself... or even while leading a party of excellent people. Being inept is a miserable thing, isn't it, 4th-san?"

Riko lies near Sayonaki's feet who's repeatedly uttering the words 'incompetent' and '4th'. Her face is turned down, as if to scrape her face to the ground. Tears drip from her closed eyelids.

The sound of stifled sobbing came from the depths of her throat, which soon reached our ears.

Sayonaki took something out from his pocket.

It's the replica cross which I had replaced with the genuine one.

"Let me tell you something, 4th-san. Humans are decided by their genes. People with no excellent traits, no matter how much they try nor work hard to compensate for it... will soon face their limit. Just like what you are right now."

Sayonaki crouched, and from Riko's chest... *Puchi*

Tugged the blue cross out.

And in return, Sayonaki stuffed the replica cross into Riko's mouth. Probably due to exhaustion, Riko displayed no resistance.

"That junk fits you better, don't you think so 4th? After all, you're junk itself. Don't spill it, keep it properly in your mouth, just like what you did when you were imprisoned."

Sayonaki stomped on Riko's head.

Beneath his sole is Riko. We could only hear, "Uu...uu..", Riko's sorrowful sobbing in intermittence.

Riko...!

(Why...?)

Why does Sayonaki need to torment Riko that much?

A way to keep us until Vlad arrives?

No, still it was too eccentric.

"Kno-Knock it off!! What's the point of bullying Riko!?"

A shout of shrilly anime voice... It was Aria.

Even though Riko is an enemy to her, but after witnessing all that, she couldn't stand watching the cruelty to her rival anymore.

"---Because I need desperation to call him. He will arrive once he hears the music of desperation. The reason why I intentionally let the cross successfully be stolen, is to let this girl taste profound happiness. So then the desperation that will follow afterward will be profound as well... And thanks to that, everything is going smoothly."

Re-pointing the gun's muzzle to Riko, Sayonaki narrowed his eyes behind the glasses.

"...Tohyama-kun. Watch closely, because being watched will make my adrenaline rush better."

Watched...?

I knit my brow.

I sensed that Sayonaki is transforming. And from that transformation...

(-----!!!)

...I had come into realization.

That can't be...!

That distinctive action of flipping a switch to change oneself...!

"No...way...!?"

I know this.

I haven't seen what kind mine looks like.

But all Tohyamas should know this.

(Hysteria Mode...!?)

No words came out of my mouth.

As I was shocked at the scene happening in front of me. It left me speechless.

Sayonaki laughed seeing my reaction.

"That's right, Tohyama-kun. This is Hysteria Savant Syndrome..."

He said it.

This guy has that power too?

The power that only our family has?

However, according to Nii-san's story, Hysteria Mode is a very frightening trait that will put your life at risk (easy to die) protecting girls... Thus, up until this generation, Tohyama was the only remaining lineage who has inherited this ability.

"Hysteria... Savant?"

Beside me, Aria knit her brows as she tries to comprehend those words.

I dared to keep silence.

"Tohyama-kun. Kanzaki-san. It's a brief parting for now. With this, I can finally call him... But before I leave, let me give you a lecture regarding I-U."

He even mentioned I-U.

"You probably have heard this already from Jeanne or 4th. I-U is a place where everyone shares their ability to one another. But that kind of playhouse act only applies to the lower ranking members, like those two. However, Vlad and I caused an uprising. Just like Hysteria Savant Syndrome, we brought about the power to mimic passive ability."

Mimic passive ability...?

"I've heard something similar. I-U had developed new technique to copy passive abilities."

Sayonaki shook his head upon Aria's remark.

"The technique itself isn't really new. 600 years ago, Vlad empowered himself by copying other's genes without the need to undergo inheritance... In other words, by sucking blood."

...Sucking blood...?

"I was the one responsible for making it possible to extract abilities from anyone... This explanation might be confusing for high-schoolers like you but, I used a retrovirus to selectively embed the newly extracted abilities into his DNA."

Sayonaki continued his explanation under a complacent face.

"It is also my job to collect genes from exceptional bloodlines. Remember last time at the infirmary room? I was planning to extract blood samples from Butei students with superior genes when I was interrupted. It ended in failure due to your peeking act. It seems the training I put to the wolves to attack anyone they sensed watching the process, had backfired on my plan."

...So he was planning to collect blood samples from exceptional bloodlines, and use that blood to copy the genes.

---Oh yeah, Muto had mentioned this at that time: "Someone saw a girl walking out with unsteady steps from Sayonaki's research lab." That girl too, must have had her blood sucked out by Sayonaki.

Beside me who's furrowing my brows, Aria is gritting her teeth.

"Vlad, Romania, vampire... That's... That's right. Why didn't I realize this sooner? That's more than enough clues for the answer. Kinji, I figured out Number 2's real identity."

Real identity?

I turned head my towards Aria's direction. Aria turned to face me as well.

"Vlad is actually Count Dracula."

Aria blurted out a not too ordinary word.

"Dracula...? Was that... the last boss that appears in Castlevania games?"

"No. Vlad Dracula was once a prince of Wallachia... which is Romania now. He's not a fictional character. He did really exist. I've heard about him back when I was enrolled in Bucharest Butei High School. There was a famous ghost story that Vlad Dracula is still alive."

Sayonaki nodded upon Aria's words.

"---That is correct. I am surprised that you know that. Tohyama-kun and Kanzaki-san, the one you will be granted audience with in a matter of time, is the real Vlad Dracula in flesh. Doesn't that make you excited?"

"These are all far-fetched. First of all---"

I glared at Sayonaki, shaking my head left and right.

"If you have copied Nii-san's power, then how is it possible that you can continue tormenting Riko like that?"

Hysteria Mode is a power that is supposed to protect girls.

If you get used to it, fighting a girl in that mode is possible, but that's only as a self-defense means or like correcting a girl's wrongdoings. Whichever the case, it requires a valid reason to justify the act.

But, stomping at a girl's head like that, or doing an act to disgrace them, it obviously can't be done with a guy under the influence of HSS.

"That's a good question. It's the teacher's job to answer student's questions. But to answer your question, I'll need to explain everything in order... A long time ago..."

Sayonaki started an old story as if to recite a fairy tale.

"In this world. There was a species called vampire, who overwrote their genes and evolved through sucking blood. Those who indiscriminately picked their meals mostly met their demise. However, there was one vampire named Vlad, who, due to picking mostly humans as his target meal, gained human knowledge. Using that newly acquired knowledge, he carefully planned his diet by sucking various types of blood. As a result, he gained a robust and healthy body, outliving his kin."

Whether this story is true or not, is not a problem at the moment.

"However, in order for Vlad to maintain that knowledge, he needed to keep sucking human blood. As a result of that, Vlad's genes had been continuously overwritten by human genes. And alas, Vlad himself, had gained a human form like me."

What is Sayonaki's intention behind transforming into Hysteria Mode...?

"Vlad, concealed within me, will appear whenever I get excited. In other words, he will surface when the endorphins released in my brain reaches a critical level. However, upon living for a long time, my body had been gotten used to many different types of exhilaration that it was hard to excite my body anymore. "

...That's what I am trying to discern.

"But not long ago I found the solution. Yes, by copying Tohyama Kinichi's DNA. The resulting endorphine influx from HSS is enough to call Vlad!"

Flash

Again thunder boomed in the distant sea.

The smirking Sayonaki had once again kicked Riko's head.

The replica cross inside her mouth extruded to the floor.

"Behold! His arrival has come."

Sayonaki spoke the words as if he was expecting the descent of messiah from heaven.

"And here's the answer to your last question, Tohyama-kun. I am a vampire, not a human. Therefore, a human girl isn't the object that I have to protect. Just like how a human sees a chimpanzee girl. We view humans as an entirely different species. But as luck has it, it seems I experience pleasure in abusing lowly beings. In other words, I am a sadist. And by abusing them, I activate my Hysteria Mode."

I can feel Sayonaki's true presence with my HSS's heightened sense.

Judging by that state, his hysteria'd existence is transforming further into another level.

What... is this...!?

This is exceeding the level of Hysteria Mode!

It's like a ritual of 'Soul' being swapped.

This bizarre phenomenon... it resembles something like a double personality.

No...

"Me-Meta...mor...phosis...!?"

Aria's words, intermittently chopped from incredulousness, is more accurate.

It's more appropriate to call it metamorphosis.

Yes, he's undergoing metamorphosis.

In front of us.

R-Rip... Rip...

The clothes enveloping his body were getting ripped in pieces like paper. The skin below that became evident soon turned into a ruddy color. The muscles in his shoulder and arms, after uttering a creepy sound, had bulged in size like a stallion. The pants covering his lower body, only the upper half of it remained to cover his body. The skin exposed in it was furry like animal's.

The skin on his upper body had an ivy-like, eye-shaped mark, distinct in its white color.

That is definitely... a monster.

That's all I could say.

So, the monster-like illustration that Jeanne drew...

...wasn't a lie after all.

"Ce mai faci... Ah, should I rather speak in Japanese? First time meeting you two."

Not only his physical looks, but even his voice had changed. It sounded like an overlapping voice of several people talking at once. Sayonaki, with his hair-raising voice...

"We have been communicating with each other through minds... That's why I have already heard everything from Sayonaki. Have you noticed it? I am Vlad right now."

...he re-introduced himself.

The vicious eyes piercing this way radiated a golden shimmer.

"...I see... It's making sense now."

I clucked my tongue. Aria turned towards me.

"W-What do you mean?"

"Well, these are just my deductive reasonings..."

I spoke with raised voice so that the enemy could hear it as well.

It will be a huge problem if Sayonaki, or Vlad... would start explaining everything about Hysteria Mode. Thus, I took the initiative of elucidating the situation.

"It's kinda like mimesis."

"Mimesis...?"

"You must have seen one in your favorite animal show, Aria. Like for example, a tiger longhorn disguised as a bee to live comfortably in their environment. In that case, not only do they copy the target's 'appearance', but they also mimic the target's 'behaviour'."

"Y-Yeah. I have seen something like that."

"Vlad-Sayonaki's transformation is the vampire-human version of that concept. As you see, that is what that guy originally looked like, but in the process of evolution, he achieved the form of a human as a product of mimesis. That mimesis is so powerful that, he not only achieved the appearance of a human, he even achieved a 'human personality' as well, which is Sayonaki by the way. Strictly speaking, both are different from each other... it's kind of like having a split personality. Vlad's vampire-appearance and personality were concealed inside the human's appearance and personality."

Aria's eyes opened wide as I volubly explain my reasoning. It seems Aria just noticed that I had transformed into Hysteria Mode.

She stared at my sedate face. And at the moment she met my gaze, she flusteredly averted her eyes and turned towards Vlad.

"So you have been mimicking us humans all along. It's like, as if you're infiltrating our human society."

"Yeah. Something like that."

Vlad, who appeared to be listening to my deductive reasoning as well, curtly expressed his affirmation. It seems he was different from Sayonaki who's fond of protracted and complicated explanation.

One furry arm, with its sharp and long fingers reminiscent of a scythe, grabbed Riko's head.

"Uu....!"

"Yo, 4th. It has been a while. Was it since I-U the last time we met?"

Vlad easily lifted Riko in the air with one arm. At that moment...

The pistol that should have been pointing at Riko was diverted.

I was like: "A CHANCE!", and open fired a 3-bullet burst, aimed towards Vlad's arm.

Bang *Bang* *Bang*

The three bullets simultaneously landed to their targets. One bullet destroyed the pistol, one pierced the forearm, and the other one apparently hit the upper arm.

However...

"...Ugh!?"

The one who raised a groan wasn't Vlad but me.

The two wounds on Vlad's arm... after releasing a red smoke, were healed. The healing process was like the closing of a mouth. It sealed the wound immediately. And the process happened in about one second.

The two bullets that pierced his arm, got expelled out, producing a clanking noise when it fell to the floor.

After Vlad made a silent snort, he glared at me with his golden eyes.

"Tohyama. You can crush a tomato with one hand, right?"

"???"

"For me, a human's head is no different from a tomato. I can easily crush one upon my will. That's why there's no need for me to rely on this toy anymore."

Vlad smoothly moved his arm that was supposed to have been shot. He picked up the broken pistol, and crushed it with one hand.

W-What power...

He crushed the pistol that was made of steel as if it was just a plastic model.

If that powerful arm squeezed Riko's head... seriously, it would be like crushing a tomato with one hand.

"4th. Come to think of it. You didn't know that I can transform into my human form."

Vlad drew Riko's head near his face.

"V...Vlad...! You... tricked me...! You said... if I defeat Holmes... you will grant my... freedom! That's what you... promised... back in I-U...!"

Riko glared at Vlad. Her eyes are shedding tears of vexation.

"...Would you keep your promise to a dog?"

GWAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Vlad laughed hard, revealing his sharp fangs that resembled knives.

That kind of laughter itself, was beyond what humans can produce.

"Return to your cage, Brood Bitch. I thought it would be interesting to let you out of your cage for a bit. But in the end, you only just proved your own incompetence. You couldn't defeat Holmes, your modus operandi for stealing is crappy, and on top of being weak, you're an idiot beyond salvation. You're unlike the one who was expected to be Arsene's descendant that I fought in Paris."

Vlad fought Arsene (Lupin the 1st) in Paris 100 years ago. The conclusion of the battle was a draw.



"But it doesn't change the fact that his blood is flowing through yours. If I do the right breeding, I can make myself an ideal 5th to extract the blood and assimilate!"

Vlad thrust Riko towards us.

"Tohyama. Would you like to copulate your genes with this?"

---That scumbag...!

For him, the mating of humans to create new genes is like cross-breeding peas to bring about a new breed of beans.

He's looking down upon us humans.

"Imbibe this into your mind, 4th. You can never escape me. That is your fate."

Vlad heaved and swayed Riko in the air, half-shouting those words, half-guffawing.

"Whether it is in I-U or anywhere else, no matter where you flee, there will be no place for you in this world other than your cage. Look. This will be your last backdrop of the outside world. Make sure you preserve the scenery in your mind. Gaahahahahaha!"

"Ri-Riko...!"

"Riko!"

Aria and I called out to Riko at the same time.

Riko tightly closed her eyes, not wanting to let us see her crying face.

But that fruitless resistance was betrayed by trails of tears dripping from her cheeks.

"...A...Aria..."

The supercilious Riko, with her temerity now gone from exhaustion, called to us with a voice that she squeezed out with all her might.

"...Kin...ji..."

She called to us; to the one who she considers rival and to that rival's partner.

And spoke with low voice...

".....He...lp....."

...the very same word that she spoke at the rooftop of girl's dorm.

"It took you long to say that!"

Aria shouted with her anime-voice as if like a popping of a balloon,

The two wolves jerked, apparently intimidated.

"Kinji. We'll save Riko first. I'll leave the side to you."

After Aria shouted her order...

Her body shot forward, with a speed as if her back was installed with a rocket booster. She made a beeline for Vlad, charging towards him as if like a shooting star. That small back, I could perceive, shouldered no hesitation nor uncertainty.

Howl

The two loyal wolves pincerd Aria from both sides, as she approached their master.

However, Aria didn't even glance upon the two assailants.

By saying "Side", what Aria meant was she entrusted the dispatching of wolves to me.

That's how much Aria trusts my combat ability right now.

...So then there's only one course of action. I must live up to her expectations.

"Forgive me..."

Apologizing to the wolves... *Bang* *Bang*

I released two shots left and right with my Beretta.

The wolves...

Thud

...fell over on their spots as if lying down.

Shortly after that, Aria safely crossed the space between the mouths of the wolves.

I followed suit, throwing an apology once more to the downed wolves as I passed them.

No, I didn't take their lives.

I only grazed their spinal cords using the pressure from bullet fire. It will take five minutes until they recover from immobilization.

Well, I only copied the technique Reki used to paralyze the other wolf though.

"Vlad! Riko is mine! I won't allow you to steal my target!!"

Target, you say...

Aria, not able to hear the side remark I made inside my mind...

Gagagagagagann!!

...rolled towards Vlad's right side, and released a shower of bullets.

Bachi *Bachi* *Bachi*

A raw sound of flesh puncturing resounded momentarily...

Aria successfully landed 10 shots of .45 ACP bullets in Vlad's shoulders, arms and feet, in a skillful display of precision without hitting Riko. Her assault punched windholes around Vlad's body.

"---What a brat. It seems like you're asking how a game should be played."

Vlad, who's supposed to be shot, merely laughed.

The wounds, as expected, after producing a red smoke, were healed.

Watching that scene gave me a scowl.

I unconcealed the butterfly knife's edge with my left hand. Vlad was occupied with Aria at the moment. Using that opportunity, I lunged towards Vlad's open left side, encircling my way around through his blind spot.

Chuck

And pierced the part of the wrist of the arm that was gripping Riko.

"Sayonaki-sensei. You have taught us a lot of things. But now it is my turn to teach you something..."

Chuck *Chuck*

I followed two more thrusts to the same wrist as if to gouge it.

Well, to be precise...

I severed his **flexor carpi ulnaris**, **palmaris brevis**, and **palmaris longus muscles**.

"The proper way to carry a girl... is like this!"

I forcefully pulled Riko away from Vlad's arm, and carried her in a ohime-sama dakko^[24] fashion.

"...Ohh!?"

Vlad expressed his astonishment as his arm lost the ability to grip.

I see. The construction of his muscles is not much different from humans.

But the wounds, just like before... after raising a red smoke, were healed.

(I need to do something about that healing ability soon...)

Carrying Riko in my arms, I moved myself away from Vlad, rejoining Aria who apparently took the same judgement.

"That talk a while ago... it was complicated so I didn't fully understood all of it... But I'll tell you this, Riko!"

...What? You didn't understand it? I asked in my mind as my face quivered in incredulity.

Aria bared her fangs as fierce as a vampire.

"If you want to deceive me, then that's fine. But if you plan to use me, I would prefer to be used in this kind of fight rather than to be used in a stealing act!"

Eh!? So for Aria, that was the point of the problem!?

"And Vlad!"

This time she turned towards Vlad.

"You called me a brat a while ago! I am already 16 years old. I'll take your remark as a personal insult!"

"All the same. To me who has lived for 800 years, all humans are brats."

"...You said it again! I'm not gonna forgive you anymore even if you cry and beg for forgiveness! You're a Romanian noble right? Then you should know the consequence of insulting a noble."

"...And what will you do? Eh? Can you even do something... to the impeccable me?"

Vlad eyed Aria with a sneering gaze.

"Don't ask an obvious question. I'll arrest you of course, then I'll drag you by the ears if you refuse to testify in front of the supreme court! The share of 99 years of sentence put upon my mama for being implicated in false crime, shall be your atonement in jail!"

Vlad laughed hearing that.

"Geahahahahahaha! Arrest me? That was a splendid joke, Holmes!"

Aria showed no intimidation from Vlad's inhuman golden-eyes. As you expect from the one bearing the title of 'Quadra'.

"Vlad, you are really stupid. If I have to give a comparison of your stupidity... I'll say around Kinji and Muto level."

Hey!

Don't lump me in the same level as Muto!

"'Endless Sinner Vlad'. Out of all my targets, you're the most mysterious and elusive one to find. But here you appeared in front of me nonchalantly like that. You should prepare yourself!"

"Vampires and Humans, are like the relationship of predator and prey. Do you think a wolf would be afraid of a rat?"

"You lack knowledge despite your age, Vlad. Didn't you know? In this world, there exist rats that are poisonous."

Aria proudly retorted, putting to use the newly learned trivia that she had seen from her favorite animal show.

Then Aria shook her fingers of the arm that was laying on her waist in a certain fashion.

As if like strumming an invisible guitar, Aria surreptitiously gestured with her fingers, making sure that Vlad isn't noticing it.

This is one type of code-signal that Butei use. It's called, 'Tapping'.

Promptly decoding Aria's code, the message was: 'Hide Riko'.

I see. That's why she stood out afront as if to cover us.

Following her order...

I switched location. Carrying Riko with my arms, we concealed our bodies behind the blind spot of the heliport's elevation.

"Fii Bucuros! (Splendid!) Aria, you sure have a cheeky attitude for a woman that I'm certain I would enjoy gazing at the marvelous sight of her impaled body!"

Gaha! Gaha! Gahahaha!!

Vlad, blasting out a laugh that would invoke creepiness to its listener...

He was successfully taunted. His attention is now fixed upon Aria.

Now is a good time to have a talk with Riko.

"...Riko, can you move?"

After lowering Riko to the ground like a fragile doll, she weakly nodded.

And then she looked at me as if glaring, grabbed my sleeve and drew her face close.

"Kinji... Tell Aria to retreat right now. Vlad is very strong... His strength is beyond measure! I fought him back in I-U, but I was no match for him. Even the first generation of Lupin couldn't win against him. No matter what you do, you can't defeat him. That has been proven already in the past!"

"Past? The past is meant to be changed."

I answered with a smile. In exchange, Riko violently shook her head.

"Impossible, I tell you! It's out of the question! It's hopeless! I can asseverate it! Our only way of getting out of this plight is escaping!"

I softly grasped the hand of the yelling Riko.

"Butei Charter article 2. 「You must fulfill the contract in the commission」. Your contract Riko, hasn't fulfilled yet."

"T-That contract! It was already void the moment I betrayed you two!"

Sealing her wailing, I put my forefinger on Riko's lips.

"If I recall correctly, our commission is to 'help' you, right?"

I beamed at Riko. Slipping my other hand on Riko's nape... *Chari*

...I hung the blue cross around her neck.

".....!"

Riko's big duplex eyes had blown full-open. Her reaction was as if she had seen a miracle.

"It's the real one. It was inside Vlad's pocket. I swapped it with the fake one when I stole you away from his grip."

I winked at Riko. She looked stupefiedly from the cross to my face. She glanced at the cross again, and then looked at my face once more...

Finally, her face blushed a bright red.

Among Riko's expressions that she hitherto showed me, that reaction just now was unfamiliar.

That reaction can only be achieved by an ordinary girl rather than by a girl flaunting her sexual charm. Honestly, it was a very cute reaction.

Riko's gripping of my sleeve had laxed.

Turning my back to her, I climbed over the heliport's elevation.

"Riko, You don't have to fight if you desire so. Even I wanted to run as well... But my little master would not allow that."

I directed those words behind me, to Riko who remained in her position, and then I glared at the demon Aria is facing.

Vlad.

I-U's no. 2.

Jeanne had warned me of his strength.

She said to abort our mission immediately and retreat if we ran across him.

And right now, I have ascertained his monstrous strength.

...Bullets cut no ice with him.

...And he single-handedly crushed a pistol.

I have no experience fighting the likes of him before. Even during my Assault days.

Run away Kinji. Run away now.

That's what all my cells were shouting to me.

But...

But wait...

Despite having been asked for 'help' by a girl who had suffered countless cruelty.

While my partner is audaciously battling a monster alone and also is a girl to boot.

Are you still telling me to run away?

Hah!

Even if I'm not in Hysteria Mode, I can never do that!

That's why...

It is inevitable.

That what I concluded.

Riko, I will save you from the hands of Vlad. I will help you attain your freedom.

Aria, I will be with you until the end of this battle.

I might face defeat, or in worst case scenario, my death...

But who cares about what will happen?

I am a man.

"Kuh... You!"

Aria, circling around Vlad... *Bang* *Bang* ...relentlessly pelted him with bullets unleashed from twin guns. But those bullets, as suspected, failed in inflicting damage to the enemy.

(.....?)

It's at this time I noticed the anomaly.

The white eye-shaped marks on his body... Although the wounds in that area were healed, the trails of blood remained as if it were like tears flowing from the eye-shaped marks.

Examining those with a sidelong glance, I rejoined with Aria around the heliport's border.

When Vlad saw the two of us together again, he smirked.

He turned his back to us, and made his way towards the long pole which probably is the building's base station antenna.

He's up to something.

Still, I can't go after and stop him.

We'll use this opportunity to discuss our plan.

"...That bastard. He had many chances of tearing me into pieces with his nails, but he just went for seizing me instead."

Aria, slightly catching her breath, whispered to my ear.

"I think he's planning to capture you alive. After all, that guy is a collector of famous blood."

"...No joke. Consider Holmes' blood soiled upon the time it assimilated into his body."

Aria gritted her teeth upon that envision.

"...Aria. Vlad has four weak spots around his body."

I told Aria the information Jeanne had confided to me, while convincing myself that I had kept the promise I made not to leak the information to Aria unless it was necessary.

"Weak spots... you say?"

"Yeah. If we attack the four weak spots at once, we can defeat him for sure. It seems that is how I-U's No. 1 subjugated him."

"Wh... Where did you hear all about this!?"

I considered explaining Jeanne's circumstances to Aria but unfortunately, we don't have much time for that. Instead, I grabbed Aria's both shoulders with both hands, and forcefully turned herself to face me.

Drawing my serious face closer, Aria was like... "Hawa!" making a flustered face.

She probably thought that I'm gonna do something to her, as she stiffened her shoulders. Hey, quit circling the wagon!

"Wh-What!? What is it!?"

"Butei Charter article 1! 「Believe in your comrades and help each other」. I'll give you the explanation after this fray is over."

"I-I-I get it! S-So can you not bring your face here that close!?"

Perceiving her blush meter was approaching the verge of its limit, I released Aria.

(If memory doesn't fail me, the location of the weak spots...)

Watching Vlad, who's trying to uproot the giant antenna from its towering position, I quickly scanned his body for marks and found three. One on

each shoulder, and one on the side of the waist. It corresponded to what Jeanne had told me.

"It's those eye-shaped marks."

However, the last weak spot was nowhere to be found. Aria realized that as well.

"Kinji, there are only three!"

"The location of the fourth weak spot... is unknown at the moment. We have no choice but to ferret it out as we fight him. About the plan for the simultaneous assault... Aria, you take care of the two on the shoulders. I'll hit the one on the side. And about the fourth one, I'll do something about it."

"...Got that. But to be honest, I only have two shots left. So let me know when it's time to shoot. I'll pretend to have been out of ammo until then."

Aria pulled out two undersized Japanese swords (i.e. Kodachi) from her back.

My brows wrinkled upon seeing that.

(Out of ammo, huh.)

I wish I could lend Aria spare ammo, but unfortunately, Aria's Colt Government, which is a wide-barreled gun, uses a wide caliber .45 ACP. It's not compatible with my Beretta's or Riko's Walther P99's ammunition, which both use standard size 9mm caliber bullets.

A crackling noise broke my train of thought. Turning my head towards the source of the sound, I saw Vlad from beyond pluck out a 5-meter antenna pole.

Gosun

Vlad dropped the long antenna near his feet as though it was a spear. We could feel the shaking it caused even from this distance. It must weigh at least a few tons. I think it is correct to call it a demon's club now instead of antenna. It can easily destroy a bus in one sweep.

"...It has been a while since I last impaled a human. This will do as a skewer for now. So brats, are you all done with your kiddy talk? I'm looking forward to seeing what plan you came up with. For your information, garlic

or silver doesn't work on me anymore. I have gotten over all my weaknesses through sucking blood. Well... I still don't like them though."

Vlad laughed. From his open mouth flashed fangs as sharp as knives.

"Holmes 4th. Like Lupin 4th, it seems like you are a failure as well. I admit you have the nimble body of a rabbit... but you haven't inherited his reasoning ability one bit."

"...So what? Genes, genes... all you talk about is genes. Well, I guess there are lineage freaks like that in this world. Allow me to give you a piece of my mind. It appears you managed your growth by overwriting your genes but... humans aren't just decided by genes!"

Aria put on an annoyed face, and puffed out an invisible bust.

"It's true that genes and DNA are determined at birth and restrict people to a certain degree, but you know... your nature can be nurtured by assiduous effort to improve oneself! If you say Riko didn't inherit any superior genes, then she's the living proof of that hard work!"

Stealing a peek behind, I saw Riko's ribbon, who's hiding behind the blind spot of the heliport's elevation, quiver. She's apparently listening as well.

"...I have fought Riko twice before. And I can say that she's really strong!!"

Aria yelled like a roar. Vlad picked up the antenna and brandished it.

"You've only felt that way because you're both failures."

He wielded that antenna pole effortlessly as if it was just a short stick or something.

"However... you're different from Lupin 4th in that you have Tohyama as a partner to compensate your weakness. They say beware of Holmes' lineage when teamed in two. I picked up that warning a long time ago. That's why I have to dismiss you first, Tohyama Kinji."

Glaring at me with those golden eyes...

"Inebriate yourself upon the melody of Wallachia's magic flute---!!"

After declaring that, Vlad arched backwards. His chest slowly expanded, sucking in air as it created a noise like a jet engine.

W-What is he planning to do!?

His chest swelled like a balloon. It even made me slip the chance to fire my gun upon seeing that bizarre scene.

Byaaaaaaaaaaaaavaaaaaaaaaaaaaa----!!!

A howl!

The whole landmark tower shook upon that beast-like howl. It even scattered the dark-clouds hanging in the rooftop's environs.

Distance-wise, it was probably even heard in places a hundred meters away.

It made Aria's and my uniform flap--- it wasn't caused by the winds, but the noise.

Our brains were shaken by that noise as if like how a flan was shook inside a case. I felt like all my organs had been swayed, and the blood throughout my body had been stirred.

I sealed my ears with my hands to prevent loss of hearing. I closed my eyes so that they wouldn't pop out. It was a great effort keeping my standing despite the shock.

A moment of storm or something similar had passed.

"Who... Who would have thought Dracula could howl!?"

Aria, who tumbled on the ground on her butt, picked herself up with trembling feet.

"-----!!!"

Then I realized, after seeing Vlad's smirk...

...that I was not in Hysteria Mode anymore.

(He disabled my Hysteria Mode...!?)

I felt my powers were debilitated.

I broke into cold sweat.

We've been had.

After learning Hysteria Mode, he even discovered a way to disable it.

He probably realized my Hysteria Mode was canceled, as Vlad slowly tread his way here, carrying the antenna pole on his shoulder.

If I got hit by that pole...

It will break the bones in my body... no, it will shatter them.

What should I do now... Is there a way out of this?

...Even racking the brain of my Normal Mode does no help.

"Kinji! He's within killing range now! What are you standing there like a pole!?"

Aria bellowed, and did probably the last thing I would expect that she would do to me. She toppled my feet.

I fell backwards...

"!?"

Cutting the air with a swift strike, Vlad's pole zipped past right in front of my nose.

And then... Tiiiiinnnggg!! A sound of metal clashing reverberated.

Aria took the hit that I was suppose to take.

Aria had managed to block the pole using her Kodachi. However, the residual force of the weapon collision had sent her flying to the edge of the heliport, throwing her out of bounds.

"Aria!"

Around the same moment of my shout, Vlad's pole launched its second strike.

I rolled to the floor, attempting to evade its onslaught, however, the pole still grazed my shoulder.

"---Ugh!!"

Gasshh!!

Even with that little scratch, its force was enough to send my body flying as though I had been hit by a car.

My vision spun around, realizing that my body was rotating in midair.

I've been blown away... literally! By 10 meters... no, twice of that.

I couldn't do anything. I was completely at Vlad's mercy. Me without Hysteria Mode is just an average high school guy.

Helpless upon that cruel truth... my body made one rebound on the floor, and swept past the edge of the rooftop...

Ah...

The moment it occurred to me to extend the grappling wire to thwart my fall, everything was over. That ephemeral window-of-opportunity is now beyond possibility.

"-----!!!"

I'm falling!

296 meters above ground.

Going straight towards the ground.

---I'm dead.

Seriously, this time I'm dead.

They say you'll see swirling lights before your time comes, however, in reality, it left you vacantly staring ahead.

I can't think of anything right now.

My mind is blank.

I could only glance at the rooftop. Watching it recede as if like I'm watching a backward jet-coaster ride.

(----?)

From the rooftop... came a pattering sound.

The pattering sound was caused by a figure of girl's dashing.

(Riko?)

It was Riko.

Her frill-customized skirt flapped in the winds.

Tan!

With that elegant figure, as if like performing a high dive in pool, she jumped off the rooftop!

(-----!!!)

Riko, with eyes that had turned into like that of a beast's, adjusted her posture in midair. She glued her feet to the wall. Running along the wall like a ninja, she descended the building.

Her running was faster than my falling.

Her long blond hair had transformed into the shape of a F1 car's rear-wing, probably to assist in balancing Riko's mid-air dash.

"Kinji!"

Riko called out. And then...

Tan!

Kicking the wall, she leapt towards my falling body.

And then, for only God knows why, she shoved my head inside her skirt, and clutched it between hips.

"Wh-What's happening!?"

At last, I could finally say something to Riko, who seemed like I've been giving a shoulder ride from the posture...

Riko untied the ribbon that's fastening the back of her sailor uniform.

Upon doing that... the skirt fanned out above us and bloomed like a flower in air! Its pleats stretched continuously, gradually spreading out.

And turned into a paraglider.

Riko's paraglider immediately caught the wind current. We hovered in circles around landmark tower.

Her legs propping under my armpits.

"Ri...Riko...!!"

The building's outward appearance is totally comprised of glasses of windows, therefore, we can see our reflection on it.

I gawked at the sight of Riko reflected upon the building's windows. She's only wearing underwear!

W-Well I guess that can't be helped, because we're using her customized uniform as a paraglider at the moment. Then that means... these legs that are suspending me, if I trace that upwards...

On my nape, I perceive the soft sensation coming from the flimsy fabric, no... it's not just a mere fabric... I could also feel warmth from it... and softness. It's... in other words...

How should I say it...

It's THE underwear, right?

Right? RIGHT!?

And beneath that is...

When I pictured the thought of THAT pushing against my nape...

Throb

My heart made a one huge jump.

Even though we're in this situation.

What's more, in order to keep me from being shaken off, Riko had tightened her grip, further squashing my face with her hips like a freshly-picked voluptuous white-peach.

And those hips... everytime she veers into a change of direction, it helplessly fondles my face and rubs it.

This rapturous sensation... I can't get enough of it.

Riko... I'm not gonna ask you to let go of me. And I know this time you were not deliberately using your body to tease me. But this... is too stimulating.

Throb

Moving my eyes up, Riko, in honey-gold underwear, was controlling our altitude using the ribbon's break cord.

That Riko's serious face, with a huge gap from her usual childish countenance made me...

Throb

This would be today's third time... of my transformation.

"---Riko."

I spoke with a grim voice.

"The last time you used this gimmick was during the hijacking incident right? Back then we were still enemies. But now, you jumped off the building to rescue me a moment ago."

Riko gave no reply. She continued controlling the break cord.

"The past has been changed, Riko... with your decision."^[25]

Our altitude is hovering in flat level, neither ascending nor descending.

Riko.

Right now, she's probably conflicted whether to go back to the rooftop, or to escape to the ground.

"Riko. You're a girl capable of changing your past. That's why there's no reason to continue living in the fear of your past anymore. Don't let the past change you, you ought to change it instead! That goes for the thing about Vlad as well!"

Riko was silent for a few seconds upon my persuasion.

And then...

"Ki-kun."

She answered, with a low voice almost like mumbling.

"Riko. You are you. Don't let them call you the 4th!"

As if my yelling had egged her on, Riko took a deep breath. The huge breast unbefitting of her small stature had gained even more volume.

"Ki-kun... Call my name."

"Riko."

With a trembling voice, I called Riko's name.

"One more time."

"Riko!"

"Again!"

"Riko!!"

Whoooshh!!

The paraglider caught the rising wind, and it abruptly ascended with an angle almost a straight line going upwards.

That's right.

Your name is Riko.

Not a number.

Nor just a gene of a famous bloodline.

And like what Aria had said before...

You're not incompetent. You've never been!

I know that more than anyone else. After all, you saved me in the nick of time from my fall.

"Ki-kun."

Riko spoke to me as we headed towards the roof.

"Ki-kun would probably never believe Riko's words anymore after deceiving you and Aria twice. But Vlad, he has four weak spots around his body. You've heard that from Jeanne already, right?"

"Yeah."

"Those four spots actually marks the location of the organs exclusively for vampires. It's called 'Demon's Entrails'. It is the one that provides Vlad's instant recovery function. Those organs are highly evolved that, even if only one is left working, the last one can restore the other three within a second. Therefore, destroying them all at the same time is a must to completely break the system."

So that's how it works.

"I'm not gonna tell you specifically where the last one is. Your glance might reveal it to him. But I know where it is... After all, I've been living with him for a very long time."

"What will happen once we destroy all four?"

"All the weaknesses he had as a vampire will re-emerge. Vlad could not actually overcome his weaknesses. He just patched it up by evolving his Demon's Entrails to resist them."

"Then that means..."

"All the well-known vampire weaknesses shall become his true weakness. Silver will be highly toxic to him, sunlight will scorch his skin, and garlic can cause him an allergic reaction."

Riko changed our direction, waiting for the next gust of rising wind.

"There's still one problem, Riko. Even if we know where all the marks are, we don't have enough guns to destroy those."

In order to destroy the four marks at the same time, we needed four guns to shoot it.

Aria will take care of the two, and I will shoot the third one. How we will do the last strike is the biggest problem.

We don't have any more guns. Both Riko's Walthers were disposed by the wolves off the building a while ago.

"Yes, we have enough. Riko has a gun that was a keepsake of her mother. But it's only good for one shot."

I looked up to Riko. I surveyed her body, however, I couldn't find where the gun she was talking about was possibly hidden.

"Riko is hiding it, in the same place as her mother."

"...Okay. I'll contact Aria after getting off--- Then we'll execute the simultaneous assault."

"Ki-kun. This is an all-or-nothing chance. Vlad thought that Riko doesn't have a gun after disposing the two Walthers. He even destroyed his own gun as well. He's afraid of four guns that were gathered against him. I am very sure that he'll become cautious once he sees four guns rounded up in the battlefield. Once he does that--- consider us already defeated."

I guess you're right.

Riko made a sharp turn. Finally we reached the same level of the building's rooftop.

There, we saw the worn-out Aria circling around the edges of the rooftop as she just evaded Vlad's pole.

She had probably confirmed our safety long ago.

She back-flipped with such a risk that it could make a watcher shudder. She landed almost at the very edge of the rooftop, probably to lure Vlad towards her. A slight miscalculation could result in her falling off the building.

But Vlad, as suspected, didn't fall for Aria's diversion.

Riko released my head in an action like as if we were riding on a swing in the midair. I successfully landed on the floor, rolling on the ground before springing to my feet.

"Aria!"

I shouted, and charged straight towards Vlad.

"Now!"

Following what we had planned before, Aria, hearing my signal, flared her skirt. She pulled out her twin guns, and instantly took an aiming stance.

While I edged further towards Vlad. Riko disengaged the paraglider. She descended the sky, landing straight towards Vlad.

---Here we go!

A four-shot unison strike--- We can pull this off.

There's only one chance provided to us.

But so what?

All chances in life come once in a lifetime.

"VLADDD!!!"

Aria aimed at Vlad's shoulders. She's the first to pull the trigger. Right at that exact moment...

An unexpected misfortune had struck us.

Flash

Or rather, it was a lightning bolt that struck.

"Ugh---!?"

A lightning bolt had struck from somewhere in the city.

Aria shut her eyes in reflex. Still, it seems she couldn't stop her fingers from pulling the triggers. Finally, the two shots were fired from the muzzles of black and silver-white gun.

Ahh...

Who could have thought the master of arms would blunder at the last moment!?

And it was because of lightning...!?

But..

It's not over yet!

(I won't let it end like this!!)

Heightening my Hysteria Mode's senses...

Now I can see everything in slow motion.

Yes. It's the same as what I did when we fought Riko during the hijacking incident.

I can see the bullets that Aria had fired. They are flying at a subsonic speed...

I can even see their trajectories clearly with my current sight.

The left bullet has no problem. It will land straight in Vlad's left shoulder.

But the right one... is a bit off. If it continues like that, it will just pierce Vlad's right armpit instead.

However.

That flight path...

I can...

Fix it!

"-----!!!"

Bang!!

I fired my Beretta next towards Vlad.

The bullet I released and Aria's misaimed bullet converged...

Kiiiiiiiiinnnn!!

And it grazed Aria's bullet in midair.

While adjusting Aria's bullet trajectory, my bullet flew to the exact flight path I had intended it to go upon the rebound of the previous grazing.

Bachi *Bachi* *Bachi*

The three bullets, perfectly penetrate Vlad's right and left shoulders and right side, piercing the three eye-shaped marks.

This skill is called, 'Billiard Shot'.

It's an exhibition trick that Nii-san had once shown me a long time ago. I never thought it would become handy at a time like this.

And finally, almost at the same moment...

Vlad, his face turned towards the air, tried to shout something.

At the end of his gaze is Riko, whipping out a Derringer (a pocket pistol) hidden by her cleavage.

"-----4TH!!!"



At the same time of Vlad's bellow...

Bang!

Riko's Derringer groaned the dry cry of a shot.

Gyum

After firing her gun, Riko stomped Vlad's head.

She leapt behind him.

And after cutely spinning a turn...

"Baa---kaa!!"

Riko put one forefinger under her eyes, and stuck out her tongue to express an Akanbe gesture^[26].

Vlad, unquestionably making a demon-face, at the same time is also coincidentally sticking his tongue out.

That thick, tentacle-like tongue.

The mark on the center was pierced!

"Ha...Hahahaha..."

Vlad powerlessly laughed. Probably verbal-abusing Riko had become a habit on him, he reflexively opened his mouth at the sight of Riko, which in turn made an unconscious exposure of his last weak spot.

Gatsun. He released the heavy pole he was wielding.

The way it fell was unfavorable to him.

The pole, which was as tall and as heavy as a utility pole, slanted diagonally, and teetered above him.

"Uguh...!?"

Vlad tried to shove it away, but his arms no longer had the strength...

The antenna that must weigh several tons flattened his body, with the two masses positioning as if forming a cross... His moving had ceased.

"U...wah..."

Crimson liquid gushed onto the floor as if blood was being squeezed out of him. It was the blood that Vlad had accumulated for centuries.

When I thought Vlad had raised a groan, it was actually the sound of the wolves' whine.

The two wolves, who could finally move again, edged towards Vlad with shaking feet... and created shadows for him.

Even though there was a scarcity of sunlight because of the dark clouds, that amount was still detrimental enough for him it seems.

"...What now Aria? Vlad has been squashed."

I inquired Aria.

Aria spun the two pistols like a windmill back to the holsters. She crossed her arms.

"What can we do? There's no way we can lift a pole that heavy even with the three of us combined."

"It appears so."

"He brought that weapon himself. He just reaped what he sowed."

A wry smile evinced on my face as I see Aria declare that with both fist on the side. I walked towards Vlad to check up on his state.

Vlad is vexingly looking up this way, mumbling something in Romanian language which I assume to be cuss words. At this rate, he's probably not gonna bite the dust soon. As what you expect from vampires, they're hardy.

I put back my Beretta back to the holster. When I raised my face, I saw a Kanagawa Police's helicopter flying in this direction.

Well, the battle was ostentatious enough to warrant a report.

Might as well ask the police for a rescue team and hand Vlad over to them.

But before that...

"Great job, Riko."

I commended Riko, who's eyeing the vanquished Vlad in incredulity,

"You defeated Vlad, the adversary that even Lupin the 1st couldn't defeat."

Upon saying that, Aria, who had also walked towards here, made a bothered face.

"I've been wondering since a while ago... Did Lupin the 1st really fight Vlad before?"

Riko, with her gaze still riveted upon Vlad, didn't answer. I answered Aria's question in her stead.

"It seems so."

"Hmmm...? Riko, it seems like you have an inferiority complex or something with the 1st. But..."

Aria, one hand on side, turned to face Riko. A gust of seabreeze caressed her body.

"You have surpassed him just now."

Congratulations.

Aria would not say that word, judging by her expression.

Riko, surprised by Aria's unexpected words, lifted her face. Still, she was speechless.

(...I see. I guess that's the right conclusion.)

I cocked my head.

Riko defeated Vlad, who even Arsene Lupin was unable to defeat. Although she accomplished the feat with our help, there was no rule that states that the assistance of other people wasn't allowed. If I remember correctly, the Jeanne d'Arc twins and Arsene Lupin, the three of them worked together to fight Vlad as a team. Arsene Lupin had help back then too.

And---

The reason why Riko wanted to defeat Aria badly was to surpass Lupin the 1st. By defeating Vlad, that objective was satisfied... and at the same time, rendered it unnecessary as well.

However...

"I don't owe you anything, Holmes. We just coincidentally have a mutual objective this time around."

Riko had sharpened her gaze once again. That attitude, cannot be described as friendly.

"Holmes and Lupin are mortal enemies. That fact is unchangeable... Forever."

Riko said that. Her hairs started moving.

What is she going to do?

No. Or rather, she's... already doing something?

"The feeling is mutual. The very thought of getting along with you gives me goosebumps."

Aria retorted, as her grumpy eyes sharpened their gaze.

"So? What are you going to do now? If you plan on running away, then I'll go after and catch you. I'll throw you to the Dagulas or anything to make you testify for my Mama. It's wise to surrender now Riko... Your deceive-by-word tricks won't help you anymore. You can't fight as a Quadra anymore due to a lack of weapons. Once humans are deprived of their abilities, they will become helpless."

As she said that, Aria signaled something with her eye to me.

I bitterly smiled, and apologized to Riko. I stood in front of the door---sealing the only available exit on the rooftop.

With this, all of Riko's escape routes has been severed.

Like what Aria had said before, Riko had no more cards left up her sleeve.

I wonder what will you do now, kitten-chan.

"Aria Holmes Kanzaki. Kinji Tohyama."

She pronounced Aria's middle name in English, not in a French accent (which is pronounced as Olmes). As Riko called our full name for the first time, she gradually maneuvered herself away from us towards the rooftop's edge.

"I'm not gonna look down on you two anymore, or deceive or use you. I'm not gonna look at you two as an enemy--- but now as an equal rival. That's why--- I will be keeping the promise I made."

Riko turned to face rear. A gust of seabreeze blew past once again.

That wind pushed her hair, and it fanned out as if like a stream... revealing the reel that she had concealed inside it.

That dynamic reel, after popping a spark, spun at a swift speed. It seems she's reeling an invisible thin wire towards her.

"Au revoir, mes rivaux (Let's meet again, my rivals). I'm not gonna forgive you if anyone besides me takes your lives."

Riko says that with a face that was slightly tinged of red. Afterwards, she thrust her hands left and right like a cross...

...and jumped off the building.

"---Riko!!"

At the same time of Aria's shout, Riko called back the paraglider as if like a bird returning to its master.

Riko connected the paraglider that she disengaged when she attacked Vlad with a wired reel hidden inside her hair. And up until now, she just left it hovering in the sky like a kite.

Clutching the ribbon's break cord, Riko dove into the sky as if like swimming. Joining the paraglider elegantly, she made her escape from us.

Her body became smaller and smaller until it disappeared towards the port's warehouses.

"We've been had again. This makes it the second time."

I stood beside Aria, who's overlooking the town with Camellia eyes, and shrugged my shoulders.

I had completely forgotten about it.

That girl's most powerful skill...

...is her dexterity in escaping.

Last Ammo: You Stole my Precious Thing

After returning to Butei School, I sent a mail report to the Masters describing the act of larceny that we had committed. I was expecting an Armed-Prosecutor or something to go after us but...

Just like what Aria had mentioned before, my report was completely ignored.

In exchange of reply, what I got was an Express Delivery package containing a thick document about 'Plea Bargain'.

The massive document consisted of compiled reports from various police branches. Summarizing all those details using my Normal Mode's brain, the incident about Vlad is a perpetual non-disclosure. By abiding with the agreement, the illegal deed upon which we committed within the last 30 days will not be blamed.

I signed the documents with my signature. It seems the agreement will be established if I put it inside the reply envelope that it came with and send it by mail.

Wow. What a convenient system.

And what surprised me further was the battle that happened between Vlad and us had never gotten to the media. Thanks to the person who fabricated it, the incident about the landmark tower was explained as an accidental lightning strike.

...I learned the hard way how strictly taboo I-U's matter was in this country.

"I'm baaaackkk!! Riko made her return from the capital of the moon!"

Riko showed up in class 2-A, as if the thing with Vlad had never happened.

Rikorin! Rikorin! A portion of guys shouted and gathered around Riko.

Those swaying hands again...?

(T-That Riko...!)

Beside me, Aria, who scowled so deeply that it probably formed a hundred wrinkles on her forehead, is vacantly staring out the window, with her fist under her chin. Huh? You're not gonna get mad anymore?

Hey, what are we gonna do about Riko now!?

Ignoring her anxious slave who's awaiting for orders, Aria matter-of-factly left the classroom upon hearing the first ring of lunch break, and went off somewhere.

(...Hey, hey. What happened to arresting Riko?)

Troubled with that doubt, I attended the Inquesta lectures with a jittery mood.

During every break between classes, Riko would talk about gal-games with her fellow gamer classmates. It's the usual Riko.

I considered engaging her in conversation without consulting Aria, but it's pretty awkward muscling into their talk with that kind of topic. The words they use are very outlandish, I couldn't understand even a single bit.

And finally...school ended.

In the end, I didn't get a chance to talk to Riko. As I was about to leave the Inquesta building...

"Ki-kun."

Riko appeared from the lobby, and scampered to me.

I was surprised, and at the same time, steeled myself for her usual sexual assault.

I was expecting a hug or an entangling of arms. However... Riko just stood beside me, with a manner of an ordinary girl.

"...Ah, umm.... Shall we go home?"

W-What's wrong with you today?

She also said a clichéd line of an ordinary girl.

I've been inside Inquesta building the whole time so I didn't notice that it was raining outside. The rain had let up around the time we departed the place. At this rate, it won't be long until the rainy season is over.

We walked along the street side by side.

When I stole a peek at Riko, Riko appeared to have been stealing a peek at my face as well.

"Ah..."

Our gaze met. Riko immediately turned her eyes away.

Her face is tense with nervousness, and her cheeks have a tinge of red.

Somehow, she became retiring all of a sudden.

(Really... What is up with her today?)

I also averted my eyes towards the Rainbow Bridge beyond.

"Do-Don't make any misconception. It's not like Riko has switched over to your side."

"Yeah, I knew that... Somewhat."

I answered Riko without looking at her.

I am at a loss on how to treat her right now.

"But... Check your mail when you get home."

"Mail?"

"Riko had sent you a mail regarding your brother's lead. Riko had said this before: 'She will keep her promise'."

Nii-san's... lead!?

When I turned to her direction... Riko was already gone.

What was there... is just a trace of rainbow between the line of buildings as if it depicts the colorful Riko in the sky.

I finally got home. I was rushing towards my room when I bumped into Aria, who was just about to go out.

"Kinji!"

Aria pointed a finger-gun gesture at me, and shot me with it as she winked.

W-What!?

Yes, it was cute... but what was that all about?

She was profusely exuberant today. It was a huge difference of mood from what she had at school.

"I've got a mail from Riko yesterday. It was fishy so I've been keeping quiet about it until now. Riko said she's meeting mama's lawyer right now. I'm about to head there as well!"

Aria planned on going out in her school uniform without changing. She slipped her feet into her shoes as she jostled at me in the narrow space of the front door.

"And I got a call from the lawyer too! He said once we procured Riko's testimony, a remand is almost guaranteed!"

Remand, in this case, is a law system that if there was a problem found about the evidence in the case, the trial will be moved from Supreme Court to Appeal Court to start another hearing.

In other words, Aria's mother, Kanae Kanzaki-san has come closer in proving her innocence.

"Riko...!"

Riko kept her promise to us that she made back at the dorm's rooftop.

"That's great Aria... I'm happy for you."

I said that to Aria, while stooping low to provide a space for the narrow threshold.

"Yeah!! Yeah!!!"

Aria, with her petite body...

Hugged me out of her celebration!

A gardenia aroma wafted from her swaying hair.

A-Aria...

"....."

"Ah.....!"

Aria regained herself, and when she realized that she was hugging my body firmly with both arms...

Her face gradually turned crimson from bottom to top. Her blush meter instantly reached its limit.

My face followed suit.

"Eh...? Umm... Ah!!"

Aria was petrified for a bit. And then after a few moments, she let go of my body... backing herself away until she hit the wall. And...

Thud

She bumped the wall with the back of her head out of confusion.

Aria stammered for words. She lowered her head.

Then she took an upturned-peek at my face.

"S-Sorry... I got carried away."

Are you seriously thinking you can wave it off with that excuse?

Hmm... she just got carried away, huh?

Oh well... whatever.

Let's leave it like that then.

"....."

"....."

Aahhh!!

What the hell is this silence?

This is too awkward!

Aria didn't get mad, nor run away, and of course hugging me again is out of the question. Aria didn't do anything.

".....Umm... We-Well, I'm off."

".....O-Okay. You take care."

We exchanged awkward greetings with each other. Aria, taking a last peek at my face as she left, closed the door and went off.

Phew. I let out a sigh of relief.

Oh yeah...

I think Aria had said something before. What was it?

That's right. According to the book Shirayuki had brought:

"Girls can't do that aggressive thing to the boy that they really like!"

Hmm...?

So what about it?

What is going on with you Kinji? Why are those words suddenly crossing your mind?

There's no way Aria would like me. Judging by how she constantly points a gun at me. No, it's impossible. First of all, the source was Shirayuki's book. It's wrong to expect credibility out of it.^[27]

Hahaha.

So with these, the case is...

...closed, I guess.

But is it, really?

Yes, it is.

It is. Right, Kinji?

After Aria left... I turned on my PC and checked my mail.

(---It's true! I've got a mail.)

It seems Riko's mail has a large flash file (.SWF) attached to the mail.

The subject was: Ki-kun Stole my Precious Thing^[28]

It contains no message.

I double-clicked on the attachment and the flash played an anime video.

First, it showed a character which I think was Riko, chasing around a guy that looked like me as a song played in the background.

Wow...

Riko did you make this?

Next, it showed Aria's back figure who apparently had her neck hanged. Shirayuki reading books. Reki flying around like a sprite. Muto conducting an orchestra. Shiranui, eyes spinning dizzily. It showed each one and disappeared before the next.

If you look carefully at the background, there was a hidden message that showed a time and place.

Riko, your mischief and the tendency of doing roundabout things has never changed.

In other words, this is some sort of an invitation mail.

You want me to come at this place at that time, right?

Lastly, a character resembling Kana appeared. She said this dialogue to Riko with a bubble speech:

"Kinji had stolen a precious thing... It was your heart!"

Epilogue: Go For the Next

I see. So this was the ghost, huh.

I mumbled, as I went to the designated place, somewhere on the man-made island between the Butei School is and the Rainbow Bridge.

I had almost forgotten about Shirayuki's divination to me before she departed for Hotogi.

She said: I will encounter a wolf, a demon and a ghost.

(Shirayuki, all three of your divinations were correct.)

First, the wolf was the one which Reki and I chased with a motorbike.

Second, the demon refers to Vlad. Well, he did look like a demon after all.

And the last one... it finally made its appearance before my eyes.

The 'ghost'.

Due to the plane crash that happened back in April (the hijacking incident), the plane crashed into the wind generator, which is now in disrepair. The propellers had been bent out of shape, depriving it of its rotation.

On the broken propeller sat one silhouette, with the Tokyo dusk in its background.

It was Kana.

Doubting my eyes, I approached the silhouette, climbing over the ANA600 plane, the wreckage of which still had not been dismantled or removed from its entanglement with the wind generator,

Riko had disguised as Kana a month ago, so maybe it was just Riko using her face again. Well, since her figure is nowhere to be seen, it must be Riko.

At first, that's what I thought... As I came closer and closer, edging every meter, that surmise slowly evaporated.

This aura exclusive for Kana.

And the beauty that can almost stop time.

That's... no matter how advanced your make-up or disguises are, nothing can imitate it.

The sinking orange sun, the after-dusk sky, and the heavy clouds served as a spotlight for Kana.

Kana's long, braided hair sways in the wind. She's wearing a long-skirted, one-piece dress. Her eyes are shut, as if praying. Gradually, they opened.

Those eyes under the long brows feel like they are piercing my soul.

Those gentle gaze contains magical force stronger than earth's gravity. It makes my heart float in the sky.

(Kana...!! There's no doubt about it. It's the REAL Kana!!!)

For generations, the members of Tohyama family trigger their Hysteria Mode through sexual arousal.

Our ancestor, Magistrate Tohyama no Kin-san, could sexually excite himself through exposing skin.

In other words, he could activate his Hysteria Mode at will.

And in 21st century.

Tohyama Kinichi, my brother (Nii-san), had also discovered a way to manually activate his Hysteria Mode just like Kin-san.

However, the way he activates it was different from him.

But just like Kin-san, he can sexually excite himself and trigger Hysteria Mode without the help of girls.

That is... by turning himself into a beautiful girl!

"I'm sorry, Kinji."

Kana spoke those words with lips that are vividly rose-colored despite the lack of illumination.

"I-U was very far."

The surprise wasn't as shocking as I thought it would be.

Because somewhere inside my heart, I had been thinking that it was something like this.

There's no way Riko could have defeated Kana, who was dubbed the strongest among the Tohyamas that existed throughout the history.

Upon reflecting on all of that, the anger towards Kana slowly built up within me.

"What is the meaning of this? Tell me, Kana! No..."

I shouted at Kana, who just sat there as wind swayed her braided hair.



"...Nii-san!"

Kana... Nii-san, didn't reply with an answer.

Instead, she asked me a question.

"Kinji... Are you close... with Aria H. Kanzaki?"

Wh-What is it all of a sudden!?

I knit my brows.

"Do you like her?"

That question made me recall Aria's cute gesture, hugging my body a few minutes ago. It made my face blush red upon that reminiscence.

"That's irrelevant to the situation right now!"

Nii-san just blinked upon my furious yell.

"I was going to carry it out alone if you answered yes. But you didn't."

Finally, those rose-colored lips uttered these words:

"Kinji... Let's kill Aria together."

References

1. ↑ Note from EnigmaticRepose: "Lupin is a French thief, and the French are well-known for eating frogs; Holmes is a British detective, and limey is slang for a British person. And Frog is an actual insult from an Englishman to a Frenchman, anyway."
2. ↑ See above.
3. ↑ The way Butei's schedule was set up is, the first five class periods (or probably more, I forgot) were called the "General Subjects". The classes after that are different depending on what department the students were enrolled. General Subjects are like ordinary subjects that are taught in normal school (ie Math, English, Science etc.).
4. ↑ When Japanese people refers to someone as pink, they meant that the inside of their heads are turning pink. What it means is that they are thinking about erotic things.
5. ↑ Reverse Snapping, or 逆ギレ in Japanese is a term for the reaction of getting mad at the victim of the trouble, even though you are obviously at fault. Naturally it's the opposite case.
6. ↑ "You are being deceived by Riko! I-It's written from the book that Shirayuki brought... G-Girls can't do that a-aggressive thing to the boy that they really like!". This line will be used as a clue for later's explanation.
7. ↑ Kobun is the study of old Japanese literature.
8. ↑ Aiaigasa describes a situation where a couple shares a single umbrella.
9. ↑ There is the ABC step of relationship. A is kiss. B is fondling. C is sex. B's meaning varies, but A and C are pretty much the same to any version.
10. ↑ Shirayuki uses the term "doroubou neko" here. It is a blatant term for someone who steals someone's lover. It literally translates to Cat Thief but the term "Thieving Cat" or "Lover Thief" is its English counterpart. The first lover thief, obviously, she's referring to Aria.
11. ↑ The kanji for shirayuki's name translates to snow white.
12. ↑ What Shirayuki meant here is if she lost her chastity, that means she will lose her status Miko as well. In Japan, Miko has an impression of a virgin.

13. ↑ If you haven't caught on to it yet, what Shirayuki meant for "Fait Accompli" is to achieve C (sex) in the ABC step of relationship (check#10). She wants to beat Riko who had done up to B with Kinji.
14. ↑ Aria has a strong resemblance to Hatsune Miku (appearance-wise: same twin-tail style, small stature and flat-chest), the Vocaloid's popular prototype model.
15. ↑ What Kinji meant by "this side of world" means non-otaku people that were not influenced by anime or the similar things.
16. ↑ Shadow gait's kanji is 抜き足. It's basically a skill taught in Assault how to properly walk in tiptoe to avoid leaving footfall sounds.
17. ↑ Chippai is Riko's copulative word of Chibi (small) + Oppai (breast).
18. ↑ Mutou misheard what Sayanaki had said. Bukkorosu 「ぶっ殺す」, translates to "I'll kill you! or "You're dead!".
19. ↑ The safety vest that Butei wears can protect its wearer to almost any attacks. ie, bulletproof and bladeproof.
20. ↑ 120/20 vision equals to 6 times the sharpness of a normal person can see with a naked eye.
21. ↑ アドシアード (Adseard), is the name of a sports event, similar to Olympics, exclusively held for Buteis.
22. ↑ A Japanese common sense, if you want to start a conversation but can't think of a common topic, start by commenting about the weather.
23. ↑ What Riko meant by Honey Trap is using sex appeal to reverse the situation. The katakana "Honey Trap" was written above the kanji 「色仕掛け」 (Irojikake), which literally translates to utilizing sexual charm to do whatever you want.
24. ↑ Ohime-sama dakko is described as gently carrying the girls on the arms. The style is done by slipping your arms behind the girl's back and the back of their knee to carry them like a bride.
25. ↑ Kinji was alluding to the difference in the two events despite the similarities. The second paraglide (jumping off the rooftop) changed the first (jumping off the airplane) upon Riko's decision.
26. ↑ Akanbe is a Japanese facial gesture, usually considered childish. It consists of pulling down one lower eyelid to show the red inside, while sticking out the tongue. It is sometimes accompanied by the sound べえだ (beeda, pronounced "behhh-dah". Note: Riko said "baa-kaa" instead here). The gist of the the gesture is an infantile taunt

- the Japanese equivalent of thumbing your nose at someone, and/or yelling "Nyah nyah nyah" or "Neener neener" or the like.

27. ↑ Perhaps we can help out our dense protagonist here. Leaving aside Aria, if we use the clue in Chapter 2 Note 4 and Riko's unaccountable behavior in this chapter, we can arrive at a possible explanation about Riko's true feelings.
28. ↑ This is a reference to a Touhou fan .SWF of a similar name where a puppet master named Alice(Riko) is chasing Marisa(Kinji) who is a kleptomaniac witch. Other characters that appear in the flash video are Hourai(Aria) a doll that seemed to have committed suicide, Shanghai(Reki) a fairy like doll who follows Alice around, Patchouli(Shirayuki) reading a book, and Reimu(Kana) a Miko who is dressed up like a detective in the video and tells Alice of how Marisa "stole" her heart.

アリア 3巻

どうよ！

気付けば3巻！

巻を重ねるごとに

アリアはちまかおしく

白雪はえろかおしく

なってますね！

キンジも大変です。



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Credits

Story : Chuugaku Akamatsu
Illustrator : Kobuichi

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